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Please Come Save Us

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Please Come Save Us

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Maria Millefoglie

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We hereby recommend that the thesis of Maria Millefoglie entitled *Please Come Save Us* be accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts

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Accepted

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Abstract

This thesis explores several dominant themes that, at times, collide; and, at other times, find peace on the page. It is the struggle to discover truths about the past. It is the struggle to find a sense of place in this world and within myself. The narrator explores identity and culture from the perspective of a young daughter of Sicilian immigrants who, in order to survive, must choose what she will embrace, and what she will leave behind. The story delves into abandonment, and how it forms who we are as individuals, how it impacts our ability to love each other and ourselves. This is a story about the pain and love of family.

The story unfolds periods of darkness and chronicles a young woman's journey toward discovery, wholeness, and light. The narrative arc is not a smooth trajectory, but it speaks of the human spirit and the drive to survive. It is both a painful and inspiring exploration of human frailty, reconciliation, and a deeper understanding of others and of self.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to be a part of Stonecoast, a community of teachers and writers who have taught, inspired, and supported me to tell my story. I thank Debra Marquart for leading my third-semester project and 'walking' the streets of Gloucester with me as we explored Charles Olson's epic poem, *Maximus, of Gloucester.* She helped me to understand this poet who opened portals to the importance of place and origin, and the urgent call to pay attention to what we should save in our world. I am delighted to close the circle at Stonecoast with Susan Conley, who has guided me throughout my five semesters at Stonecoast. She has helped me to excavate places of darkness, to place those experiences into words, and move toward the glow of the amber light.

I have deepened my skills as a writer and learned to read with a writer's perspective. I have learned to listen with more patience, to be present for my peers, and to appreciate the courage of writers. I have gained the friendship and support from Mimi, Andrea, Rickey, and Colleen, who keep me laughing through the hurdles of writing and of life. I am especially grateful for my husband, Bill, whose love and patience gave me the emotional and physical space to complete this thesis. He led me to write with a birthday gift, and I couldn't have achieved this work without his support. Thank you.

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Preface

The story begins with a name, Millefoglie, a poetic name bestowed on my great-grandfather by gentle nuns in an orphanage in Sicily. Three generations of men carried this name from Sicilian to American shores, venturing as stowaways and steerage class passengers, destined for a life at sea. They were Fishermen who sailed on schooners—powered by wind and muscle—lowered into two-man dories guided only by the light of moon. Fishermen who captained eastern-rig draggers gripping the helm against turbulent seas guided by courage and faith. One of these fishermen and his wife bestowed this poetic name on me, an infant in an orphanage waiting for a home. Millefoglie, the name I carry, means a thousand pages in Italian, blank pages waiting to be filled.

I applied at Stonecoast to find the words to fill these pages with our story. In my application, I wrote: "The stories of my family are unannounced visitors who enter and exit my mind interrupting the rhythms of my work, play, and sleep." Their stories resonate with the dreams and disappointments of all immigrants who fail to assimilate in this country, but are also disconnected from the country they left behind.

I arrived to Stonecoast with blank pages and aspirations to fulfill three aims and assess where I, as a writer, have landed on the page:

Goal 1. To acquire the skills and support to excel in the genre of memoir.

Through readings, manuscript submissions, mentor guidance, classroom instruction, peer review, and an enormous amount of revision, I have certainly gained support and acquired new skills in the craft of creative writing. I also know that these skills are foundational, and that my work as a writer will require

continuous dedication to the practice of writing. In other words, I partially succeeded in my aim 'to excel" in the genre of memoir. In retrospect, my goal was ambitious as writing evolves in direct correlation with the writer's willingness to explore, self-examine, risk, and change. Writing is hard work. I have learned this lesson, which will continue to guide and to challenge me as a writer, and a person.

Goal 2. To find a voice that is authentic and a heart that is forgiving.

I have found my authentic voice; a voice that, at times, is buried when the words are too difficult to write. My mentor—love that word—Susan Conlcy never misses when this narrator strays from her authentic self. My submission will be marked with comments asking, "how was she really feeling at that moment?" or "the narrator is distancing the reader with research" or she will tell me straight out, "your voice shifted." Susan's guidance has given me the skills to recognize the authenticity of a writer's voice, especially mine. And to land with a forgiving heart, on and off the page, was the most difficult journey. At residency, I enrolled in workshops that focused on writing hard stories, self-care practices, and portraying your characters with humanity. The lessons learned are embedded in my writing and have guided my work in this thesis.

Goal 3: To be open to the story that will unfold.

Sometimes with resistance, and other times with resignation, I became open to the story that unfolded in my writing and ultimately formed this thesis. It was not the story I planned to write. That story was about fisherman and their lives at sea; it was a story of the women and children they left behind in a village in Sicily. It was informed by genealogy, research, immigration records, ship manifests, and stories from my youth. I filled the blank pages with stories of my family and friends; except I had neglected to include the story about me. I had chosen memoir, but had deleted the 'me.'

In large part, the process of writing my thesis is woven with my journey at Stonecoast, the influences and inspiration from faculty and mentors, and the support from colleagues and friends. It is difficult to extricate the thesis from the journey as they are interconnected with the themes of my own exploration as a writer, and as a person. It is not difficult to cite the literary influences and inspiration that I have received at Stonecoast. It begins with a birthday gift from my husband Bill who often said, "you got to write your stories down." He enrolled me in my first creative writing class— a memoir workshop taught by Meredith Hall through Maine Writers and Publishers Alliance (MWPA). There are encounters and books that will change a person, and this one was mine. Hall's memoir "Without a Map' is a poignant, raw account of loss and exile revealing a young woman's journey toward resilience and ultimate forgiveness. Her story touched my heart, and the structure influenced my writing. The memoir was not chronological; however, it flowed seamlessly from past to

present, despite being written in present tense. In each chapter, the reader is immediately grounded in place and time as Hall writes with unflinching honesty the devastation of giving up a newborn son when she was sixteen years old. Her writing and story inspired me, a story that has parallels to mine. We shared adoption in our lives, rejection from families, the experience of packing fish in Gloucester, and leaving the country in search of self. By the end of Hall's workshop, I had written and read—with a trembling voice—my first creative writing piece. We continued to cross paths. She encouraged me to take more classes and 'to trust my voice." I followed her advice and the path led to Susan Conley, and a second memoir workshop with MWPA. Susan taught the elements of creative writing while also inspiring us to take risks with our pieces. We concluded the seminar with a dramatic, 'salon-style' reading in the penthouse suite of the Press Hotel. Yes, Susan provided inspiration, and also encouraged me to apply for Stonecoast.

I applied, was accepted, and met Robin Talbot, Associate Director of Stonecoast with the aim to delay my admission. I didn't feel like a writer; despite writing for the healthcare industry for the past thirty years. I tried to persuade Robin to accept my deferment; however, she disagreed. "You've already been vetted," she said. I trusted in her words and entered the community of Stonecoast.

Each residency, unique and challenging, encouraged me to delve deeper into my writing, to read with a writer's perspective, and to be present for my peers. The workshops taught me to listen with more patience, and to deliver critiques with more

kindness. I have learned to be less judgmental, to appreciate the courage of writers, and the power of our stories.

Several workshops and seminars were particularly powerful and influential in my work's development. The seminar, "Writing About Trauma: Process and Pitfalls" introduced me to the work of Melanie Brooks, *Writing Hard Stories: Celebrating Memoirists Who Shaped Art from Trauma,* a collection of interviews with victims of trauma. The panelists spoke about their experiences and emphasized the belief that one can heal from trauma by putting it into the past. The workshop provided not only tools for exploring individual trauma; but also, important tools for self-care.

When approaching issues of trauma in my writing, I frequently reference the memoirs of Mary Karr for her ability to show compassion for her characters, even when they have failed her. She has a trusted voice and delivers a story with a solid dose of humor. I resonated to one of Karr's quote, "only looking back at the past can we permit finally to become past."

I was moved by the courage of these writers to share their difficult stores. I also was interested in the craft of shaping trauma and enrolled in Debra Marquart's, "Trauma Informed Elective.' Looking back at this decision, I knew, at some unconscious level, that my memoir needed to put certain events on the page. Hoffman's, *Half the House* and Birkerts *The Art of Time in Memoir* provided valuable tools that I incorporated in this thesis. One essay intentionally moved across various timelines, used third-person as a distancing mechanism, and omitted specific details of the trauma as a relief measure for both the author and reader.

Throughout my four semesters, I gravitated to seminars and workshops led by Susan Conley, Debra Marquart, and later Faith Adiele. I have gained skills and inspiration from this extraordinarily talented trio of writers and professors. An experience that stands out for me is Faith saying to the class, "This writer's descriptive skills are so strong that the reader believed we were in scene." Faith was talking about me. I completely revised the piece to include solid dialogue, summary, and reflection and have included this as part of my thesis.

Faith and Debra were instrumental with introducing me to the history of the lyric essay and the experimental structures available to writers. I resonated with the braided essay drawn by the repeated use of imagery, and the weaving of several themes within the structure. In my thesis, I experimented with this structure in "Please Come Save Us," exploring the themes of emotional distress and isolation woven with a separate essay on a storm, a distress call, a fire, and the sinking of my father's ship. My future plans include developing my skills in both the hermit and collage essays as structures to convey difficult and perhaps traumatic events. Finally, I am grateful for Aaron Hamburger's workshop on self-editing tools. I continue to be challenged with editing and revision and appreciated Aaron's 'take-away' list as a reference source. I also have a visual memory of one his pieces marked with an exhaustive number of edits and highlight citing what didn't work, dialogue lapses, weak words, scene development, etc. This image was a solid lesson on the importance of revision, and revision again.

My thesis includes a fair amount of dialogue, a dialogue that is predominantly in Italian. Although this can be challenging, it does offer a more authentic voice for

revealing my characters. I chose to not provide immediate translation, but to clarify its meaning in the chain of dialogue. This translation method is less disruptive and maintains a more solid pace. I incorporate tools from several seminars to include Susan Conley's "*People are Talking: Using Dialogue for the Reveal.*" It is a work in progress to banish adverbs, introductory statements, and explication from my dialogue. I continue to reference the assigned selections from this seminar; Jesmyn Ward's "*Sing, Unburied Sing* and Rachel Cusk's *Outline*.

I have worked to develop an authentic and consistent voice in my writing that has been guided by my mentor Susan Conley. From my first semester at Stonecoast to the completion of this thesis, authenticity of voice felt paramount. Susan recognized the voice of a 'townie' girl – a confused and sometimes rebellious teenager walking the gritty streets of a working-class town. Susan introduced me to *Townie* by Andre Dubus III, and *Another Bull Shit Night in Suck City* by Nick Flynn. I was hooked and couldn't get enough. They were like me, *townies,* stuck in a working-class town, filled with drugs, hopelessness, and no way out. Susan repeatedly said that we needed to hear the girl *townie* on the page. Susan's guidance, the voices of Dubus, Flynn, Karr, and Joanne Beard have influenced by work. I refer to their books and read a few passages when I recognize a shift my voice to the more distant adult. I attended a lecture by Dubus and talked to him briefly about voice, stories in gritty towns, and the world of *Townie* – another spark of inspiration!

My thesis is a theme-based memoir exploring several dominant themes that at times, collide; and at other times, find peace on the page. It is the struggle to discover truths about the past. It is the struggle to find a sense of place in this world and within

myself. The narrator explores identity and culture from the perspective of a young daughter who in order to survive must choose what she will embrace, and what she will leave behind. The thesis delves into the themes of abandonment and how it forms who we are as individuals, how it impacts our ability to love each other and ourselves. This is a story about the pain and love of family. The protagonist is a teenaged girl confined in a culture that demands allegiance to the Sicilian codes of honor, religion, and family. In her family, marriages are arranged, colleges are prohibited, and no one leaves the community. The story takes place in Gloucester, Massachusetts a working-class city that relies on commercial fishing for survival. The Fort of Gloucester, home of Sicilian immigrants, working harbors, and fish plants, serves as the vessel for this story. The main characters are her parents who immigrated in 1951 from a small village in Sicily to settle in the Fort. The father represents one of the 'Finest Kind'- a strong and gentle captain in Gloucester's dominant fishing community. The mother, embodies the isolated life of a fisherman's wife, resents the absence of a husband who spends most of his life at sea.

I didn't choose this story, it chose me. The journey for this writer was the compelling need to understand the forces that brought a younger self into periods of darkness. I was haunted, while simultaneously disconnected to a former self that has little resemblance to who I am today. The work explores events that led a fifteen-year old to drug addiction, a self-abandonment that was dangerous and potentially fatal. The thesis attempts to navigate the turbulent and hidden world of domestic violence, a second episode of darkness in the young woman's life. I use the word, 'attempts' as this investigation remains a work in progress. The thesis enters periods of darkness

and chronicles a young woman's journey toward discovery, wholeness, and light. The narrative arc is not a smooth trajectory; but it speaks of the human spirit and the drive to survive. It was a painful exploration of human frailty, reconciliation, and a deeper understanding of others, and of self. By examining the past and putting words on the page, these former life experiences are confronted and laid to rest in the past. This work helps to illuminate peace with the present.

The journey of writing this thesis started with researching patterns of immigration within my family who settled in Gloucester's old Fort. I became obsessed with the Fort, a three-miles section of Gloucester that is surrounded by open ocean, working harbors, and fish plants. Admittingly, there was a sentimental component embedded in my research as I sought to find visual proof of my first home in the Fort. In the 1960's, our homes were razed as part of the Urban Renewal's dubious effort to improve cities across the United States. I never found the photo of my home.

I did find documents showing that my grandfather Pietro and his brother Salvatore Favazza immigrated from Sicily to Gloucester and rented a cold-water flat at 28 Fort Square. The article noted that this address was once 'the home of the famous poet, Charles Olson.' This was how I discovered the great poet who continues to circle around me like a gull and calls me back to the place I once called home.

I have explored the work of this poet who has inspired and influenced the development of this thesis. His epic poem, *The Maximus Poems* consists of three volumes and more than three hundred poems varying in length from a single line to ten pages. Regarded as Charles Olson's major work, this poem was written between

the years 1950 and 1969, nearly the entire length of time that Olson was active as a poet, which coincided with my formative years in Gloucester. Reading through *The Maximus Poems,* I alternated in various stages between lost and found, meeting Maximus on the familiar streets of my youth and simultaneously on the foreign ground of poetry. Olson's work had an emotional impact that I could not dismiss. I negotiated to make Olson's work my third-semester project. I am grateful for Susan Conley who helped to persuade Justin Tussing that a student—with no background—in poetry could take on the challenge of Olson. The project focused on selected themes and recurring images from carefully selected works in *The Maximus Poems*. Debra Marquart agreed to lead the project and together we walked the streets of Gloucester as Olson opened portals to the importance of place, origins, and the meaning of one's existence. We discussed his fastidious specificity of place, recurrent and concrete historical references, recurring images, and references to living and historical figures. She helped me to identify Olson's references to Greek mythology that became a catalyst for several essays. I plan to return to Olson and to expand these essays. I am deeply grateful for Debra's guidance that has helped to deepen my writing and to appreciate the emotional impact of poetry.

> "The reclamation work that Mia is engaged in with Olson's work serves so many purposes--it brings Olson's work back into modern view and usage; it informs Mia's perspective as a daughter of the place that Olson chose to live in and defend in every form of writing; it provides an ongoing series of creative "prompts" that will help Mia bring her own narrative to the page. But I think there's another outcome of this work that's perhaps more important, or at least equally as important. This "in the footsteps of" work confirms to value of what we all do as writers to leave a mark, to leave a trail for those who come after us, to remind those around us to pay attention and save what's important and worth saving in the moment it is imperiled."
> Debra Marquart

As cited in Olson's work and lectures, our journey is one of 'istorian; that is, *"to find out for yourself."* I have made this journey mine.

Then, life took a punch at me. While at Winter Residency, I learned that my father's gentle heart was in acute failure. I abruptly left residency and returned to Gloucester. I was caring for medically fragile parents and working a full-time job, and now it was time for hospice care. I negotiated an interim medical leave to care for my parents, maintained the commitment to complete the third semester project, and negotiated a fourth semester leave from Stonecoast.

I prioritized my time to care for my parents who both needed around the clock care and eventually nursing home placement. I was with my father in his final days and able to deliver a fitting tribute to a man who was called, 'the finest kind' by the community of Gloucester. During this pause from Stonecoast, I wrote about this caregiving experience from the perspective of a daughter and professional in healthcare. My goal is to return to this work with the aim of publication in a healthcare journal.

In January 2020, I returned to Stonecoast as a fifth semester student and by the end of February, we are in isolation bracing for the impact of COVID-19, a pandemic that has presented me with a new set of challenges and redeeming gifts. On the list of gifts is the "Gang of Five," a sorority club of sorts that has morphed into a delightful pledge of sisterhood. We—Mimi Edmunds, Andrea Vassallo, Rickey Celentano, and Colleen Hennessy— met with magnet connection at the first

Stonecoast Residency. We are cheerleaders encouraging each other to complete our essays, finalize our projects, submit our pieces for publication, and never give-up. We share laughter as we joke about our husbands, partners, and children; rant about the life of a writer; and bitch about Donald Trump. We shed tears when one of us feels bereft with the trials of caring for family, or caring for oneself. Our friendship has been celebrated over dinner and wine, at a weekend 'writing' retreat where we forgot to write, and now we meet on Zoom. They are constant forces in my life, and I am so grateful for this powerhouse of gifts.

I also am blessed with a writing group, Becky, Deborah, Meg, Ning, and Gro, another powerhouse of women who give me unconditional support, instruction, and friendship. Every other week, I have the privilege to read exceptional writing in the genres of memoir, poetry, screen plays, and fiction. I receive critiques on my writing that propels me forward, and kindness that touches my heart. I am especially grateful for Becky and her keen editorial skills that strengthen my writing and clarifies the story. We are firmly grounded as writers and as friends. As I survey my gifts, there is enormous gratitude for my husband Bill whose love and patience gave me the emotional and physical space to complete this thesis. He led me to writing with a birthday gift and I couldn't have completed this work without his support. Thank you.

The COVID-19 pandemic, with its mandate forcing social isolation, offered me the luxury of time; however, I unraveled to the place of 'who cares about what I have to say. My confidence took a nosedive and my writing came to a halt. I sent a distress message to Susan Conley, "I hope this doesn't sound too dramatic, but I am

struggling with my writing. It feels empty and without purpose…the pandemic feels all-consuming to me and covers everything in sadness."

Susan gifted me with this response:

> "It's hard. It's unprecedented. But I will say this: everything that you do that is about art and about holding on to your creative life, is an act of survival and of endurance. It's about not giving in…We need people to care about telling the stories and making meaning of lives and of honoring language and honesty."

Susan believed I should be at Stonecoast, so I applied. She believed in my writing, so I wrote. As we close this circle, I am grateful for her wisdom and gentle guidance throughout my five semesters at Stonecoast. She helped me to excavate periods of darkness, to place those experiences into words, and to seal them as past. More importantly, she guided my writing and me to a deeper place that has moved from the darkness toward the glow of the amber light. Thank you.

Abandonment

Lose love
If you who live here
have not eyes to wish
for that which gone cannot
be brought back ever then
again. You shall not even miss
what you have lost. You'll
yourself be bereft
in ignorance of what
you haven't known.

Charles Olson

I believe this is a story about loss and abandonment, but these are my words. My family would simply say that they had "hard times," that they were poor, broken by war, and always hungry. The women talked about feast days and the food they would prepare to honor their patron saints. The men complained about their latest fishing trips and the low prices for their catch. Men and women gossiped about the strange customs of the '*mericana's*—Americans—that lived among them. But their past was *omerta*, a code of silence based on an old proverb: *Cu è surdu, orbu è taci, campa cent'anni 'mpaci*: He who is deaf, blind, and silent will live a hundred years in peace.

My grandfather Pietro Favazza died the way he lived, alone and silent, refusing to speak of the past, and too broken to live in the present. He lost love and was bereft. The fragments of his life are sealed in a small, leather box containing passports, voyage documents, a sparse number of saint cards, and an even sparser

number of photographs. The contents of this box were my mother's only inheritance. She gave them to me shortly after his death.

"*Maria, stai attento*," she said warning me to be careful. That was all she said about her father's possessions, which she discarded without inquiry or tears.

I poured through layers of documents hoping to unbury truth, knowing that the missing story began before I was born more than sixty years ago. I scanned ship manifests listing "Alien Passengers for the United States," hoping to understand the fractured history of my family's journey to this country, decisions that separated husbands from wives, and children from parents. I sought to unravel the mysteries of the Millefoglie and Favazza families—two bloodlines so entwined and entangled—with the hope to understand them and to illuminate who I was within this tribe I call family.

In the box, I found a wallet with soft, brown leather that did not reveal the wear of four decades of travel across the Atlantic. The wallet—or perhaps it should be called a portfolio—was of the size that held the *lira*, the oversized and elegant paper currency of the early 1900s. Its compartments offered homes to a prayer card for Santa Rosalia, the patron state of Palermo, and my grandfather's various inspection forms, *'Ispettorato dell' Emigrazione'*, for third-class and steerage passengers. A side compartment, covered in a sliver of black silk, held a faded black-and-white photograph of a thin girl staring straight into the camera's lens.

The young girl appears frozen in time, with no hint of emotion, no trace of a smile. Her left-hand grasps the handle of a wicker basket with seven long-stemmed roses cropping out from the basket's rim. The background is a mural depicting a

setting of palm trees and blossoming shrubs with views of sweeping valleys. The staged scene has no resemblance to my family's village, a sunbaked land nestled between barren hills and the turquoise sea. The girl's two long braids are looped into a circle and held in place with an elaborate black bow on the top of her head. Her dress is plain with a rounded collar, sleeves that don't quite reach the elbows, and a hemline that doesn't reach her knees. The back of this photograph is printed "1939" in faded pencil. This girl is my mother, she is eleven years old, and she wears a black communion dress.

This photograph lifted a shroud of mystery and opened a portal for understanding this young girl's life and how she became the woman who is my mother. It was the portal that I did not open for too many years, too absorbed with my own life, to investigate how death and abandonment impact a young child's life. I had moved away from her, and in my leaving abandoned what she wanted from me.

I became obsessed with unraveling the story of this little girl who wore a black communion dress, to understand her brokenness, and to reconcile how we failed each other. I didn't want to unravel the mysteries of my bloodline. I didn't search for the woman who gave me life, or details about her affair with the man who returned to Greece, or the siblings who might resemble me. I was conflicted about this mother of four who chose to give away her fifth child, an infant born too soon, and labeled "failure to thrive." I believed this was abandonment, but I don't know what she would say. This was her story to tell, not mine.

I quilted a history pieced together with letters, passports, ship manifests, and certificates of birth and date. On April 5, 1930, the *SS Conte Grande* sailed from Naples to Ellis Island and held Valentina, my grandmother, and her three children in its berth. With courage, she left her parents and the place that she called home. With fear, she imagined a life as a fisherman's wife, to a man who was mostly a stranger. I visualized their home, a red-shingled tenement nestled in the belly of the Fort with windows that faced an open sea. I knew the crowded streets, the sounds of circling gulls, and the smells of salt and sea. The Fort was once mine, but Valentina could not make it hers. In 1932, she left my grandfather and boarded a ship with four children in its berth, and pregnant with a fifth, for the Island that she called home. She crossed turbulent seas with the repeated echo of my grandfather's curse in her heart, "*Se te ne vai, ti abbandonero*."

"If you leave, I will abandon you," he warned her. He did not understand her depression, her loneliness, nor her need to be with her own. He ignored her letters, her pleas for forgiveness, and never spoke her name again. Valentina spiraled into despair and depression that forced a commitment to the "*manicomio*," the asylum for the insane. She lived the rest of her life in a catatonic state, and died at thirty-eight, leaving five children in its wake. I was part of this wake.

Many years later, I told an old, blind, and frail mother that her father abandoned her. We were in her kitchen, I prepared meals for the week ahead and she sat at the kitchen table barely three feet away.

"Maria, don't put too much salt in the tomato sauce," she said. "It's not good for my blood pressure."

I ignored her, knowing that she eats olives and salami for lunch.

The kitchen was filled with the earthy scent of oregano and the sweetness of cinnamon, gifts to her from my recent trip to Sicily.

"Mom, I visited the cemetery and put flowers on your mother's grave," I said.

"What does *Una Prece* mean?" I asked about the words etched in my grandmother's tombstone.

"A prayer to the divinity," She said with annoyance that I didn't know its meaning.

"*Nonno, ti ha abbandonto*," I said.

"Che dici!" What are you saying, she yelled when I claimed her father had abandoned her.

"He wasn't there when you were born."

"Those were different times," Mom moaned as she told me that this was how they survived, men worked in America, and the women stayed in the 'old country.'

"Mom, your father didn't attend his wife's funeral, he never came back to care for you," I said. "He left all of you in the care of a grieving grandmother and a sick grandfather."

"He always sent us money," Mom said, "and during the war, he had the neighbors feed us."

I made my case for his betrayal, and she made her case for his love.

We continued with our own defenses until my mother's voice shifted from indignation to regret.

"*Perche non scrivi anche una lettere*," she said softly.

She ached for the letter than he never wrote her. She lived fifteen years of separation in the shadows of a father who stayed silent. I believe this was abandonment, but she did not.

At the age of nineteen, my mother immigrated from Sicily to join the man that she will marry and the father who was a stranger. She lived with her father in Gloucester's Old Fort, three miles of crowded tenements, fish plants, and wharves—in the home that her mother had abandoned. As Sicilian families prospered, as my grandfather did, they moved away from the sea to neighborhoods in the shadows of churches. We moved to a gray-shingled duplex on a street named Liberty. Saint Anne's Church, a large, gothic structure—the church of the Sicilian fishermen—loomed over us. We lived with my grandfather on the left side of a duplex, Uncle Bennie, Aunt Zarina, and their three children on the right. An interior door to each other's kitchens and lives connected us. When the door was open, we celebrated at a table laden with home-made pasta dishes, platters of marinated octopus, salted cod, and fiery sausage. On holidays, my aunt fried cannoli shells, stuffed them with fresh ricotta, and sprinkled the ends with crushed pistachio nuts. We entered each other's homes with no attention to boundaries.

The magic of living with an extended family was broken with two words, "*Vattene ora.*" My grandfather ordered his daughter and her husband, his son and her

wife, and a total of six grandchildren to "Leave now," to leave our homes, to leave each other, and to leave him as well. "*Lasciami solo*," 'Leave me alone' were his parting words to us. The door closed shut.

It was too late to ask my Grandfather to fill in the missing pieces of his life, our lives. He died many years ago sealing the stories of our family in his grave. We had lived in the same home for ten years, but I can't recall the sound of his voice and can't retrieve his words. Our two families had battled in a long-standing feud that pitted sisters against brothers, fathers against children, and cousins against each other. An argument so intense that my grandfather evicted his family. At the end, the feud consumed forty years with its fiery rage, fueled with accusations about money and favoritism, loyalty and desertion, entitlement and resentment.

We revisited loss on the day of my uncle Benny's funeral—the one we were not allowed to attend—when my mother sat in darkness, small and enshrined in the black clothes of mourning. She sat in our parlor—a room reserved for company that we never had—and I sat next to her on the "love seat," a forlorn companion cloaked in mustard-colored velvet. Her face was pale, and voice strained. It would be days before she would leave the sanctuary of this couch. The room's chandelier hung in darkness, and its tear-shaped crystals no longer reflected light. Jesus of the Crucifixion looked down on us.

We'd bought this furniture in the 1960s before I thought I was too cool to be in the company of my mother. Like some sort of spiritual pilgrimage, we took the train from Gloucester to Boston's North Station. In a rare show of confidence, my

mother bolted toward the North End's Hanover Street, and toward a white, rectangular sign announcing "Di Carlo's" in faded green and red letters. Di Carlo's was a small, unkempt storefront squeezed between Modern Pastry—a haven for cannoli lover—and Joe's tobacco shop a seedy, hang-out for neighborhood bookies. Inside Di Carlo's, customers were seduced by crystal chandeliers in every shape and size, Capo di Monti porcelain figurines with no utilitarian purpose, and furniture that poorly replicated the Medici era. The contents of our parlor were purchased that day, the furniture of promise and pretension, and the closest my family would get to luxury. I once asked about the unused parlor, the room with furniture protected by plastic and embroidered drapery that sealed its light. My mother said it was reserved for the boyfriend I would bring home someday. It became a perpetual waiting room for dreams never realized. I never sat in this room with any man.

"Mom," I gently touched her arm as her silence frightened me.

"Maria, I'm peaceful now," she sighed. "My brother is in heaven with my mother, father, and baby sister, Ursula."

Mom stared at a faded photograph of her mother, in requisite black, surrounded by five small children of various ages, none of them smiling.

"There are only two of us left," she moaned. "Oh God, why did you take her so young?"

I didn't know if she was talking about her dead mother, who died at thirty-eight or her sister Ursula, who died at three. But I didn't interrupt her.

"Oh, my mother died before my first Holy Communion." Her words a staggering lament. "Maria, all the other girls had fancy white dresses and veils. They

looked like brides pure and ready to receive Jesus." She bowed her head at the mention of His name.

"Who were those people?" My mother's voice escalated. "Why would they make a little girl wear a black communion dress."

"Mom, please don't get upset about the past."

I, who wanted to uncover the past, was now afraid of its truth. She ignored me.

"The priest at *Santa Maria delle Grazia* smiled when he put the white host of Jesus on their tongues. Maria; he stopped when he saw me and his face looked so mean."

"You were so young," I sounded so feeble. "It was not your fault."

"I was at the end of the line and ashamed to meet Jesus in blackness."

My mom looked down at the floor.

"Dio Mio, I met Jesus like a sin."

I stored this memory in a safe corner of my mind. My mother buried it in a darker place. That night, I looked into my mother's face, searched for an entry to my mother's heart, and found none. Discovering her photograph unleashed an opening for reconciliation with my mother and myself. I began to understand the impact of abandonment, how individuals are shaped, and how they must survive. I framed the photograph of the young girl in a black communion dress and placed it next to mine. A photograph of a young girl at eight, smiling into the camera, holding a prayer book in her right hand. I wear a white dress that flares out below my knees. There is a

white rose secured at my waist, and an embroidered white veil flows from a sparkling tiara. This was my communion, and I wore a white communion dress.

My mother had no words for her losses and simply told me 'that she can't cry." I have cried for both of us. I have written these words to give a voice to her grief. I have written this story to understand the entangled web of loss and abandonment that defines the relationship between this mother and daughter. My mother found comfort in solitude and darkness. I found strength and light in the place that she once called home. I have taken the light that she could not find to illuminate my place within this family, and the history that I call my own.

Leaving Mercy

instead of going straight to the Bridge
and doing no more than—saying no more than—
in the Charybdises of the
Cut waters the flowers tear off
the wreathes

Charles Olson

Sister Loyola led our eight-grade class to the third-floor auditorium, a high-ceiled room with creaky, wooden floors that served as the boy's gym, infrequent concert hall, and the more frequent venue for bazaars—the nun's favorite fundraisers. On this hot day in June, the auditorium served as the site to enroll us for Gloucester High School. Sister Loyola was more controlling than usual as she scurried down the halls, her long, black robes swinging, and beads of sweat pouring down her face. She commanded us into two lines and marched us into the auditorium

We had just learned that our high school, St. Anne's, would close its doors by the end of June. After eight years of Catholic school, my friends and I celebrated the end of plaid uniforms and the endless rules imposed by the Sisters of Mercy, or what we called the Sisters without Mercy. Our parents were distraught about the closing of our parish high school. They had moved from the crowded tenements in the Fort to live in its shadows. The gothic cathedral loomed over our neighborhood, and it beckoned us to prayer. Unless the men were out at sea, our family never missed a Sunday mass or feast day. At school, we recited prayers in the morning, before lunch, after lunch, at every hour, and at the end of day that totaled nine prayers for each school day. We studied and lived under the watchful eyes of our nuns and priests who lived across the street from us in the red-bricked convent and rectory that they called

home. Within the brick walls of the parish, families entrusted their children to the teachings of this religious order. They could not define or understand how "public" would serve us.

When I got home that day, I tried to explain the structure of public high school and the options for courses.

"Mom, we have to choose courses from this list."

She filled a pot of water for tonight's pasta dish with her back to me as I sat at the kitchen table reviewing my course options.

"Mom," I yelled above the sound of running water. "There are good classes under College Prep."

Mom turned off the water when she heard the word, 'college' and turned to face me with folded arms across her chest.

"College, Mom reminded me, "*Ma chi pensi di essere la figlia del sindaco*," She told me that I was not the mayor's daughter, as if I needed any reminders.

"Mom, these classes get you ready for college." I explained. Maybe, I could study to be a teacher or a social worker, or…" I never finished my sentence.

"I'm not gonna lose my daughter to a college." She turned her back and returned to the sink.

I was in tears and at a lost to explain a place that I have never seen. None of our family members had children that went to college. This was foreign ground. I tried one last time.

"What will you let me do!"

"You can work as a bank teller on Main Street. It's a clean job, you won't get your hands dirty."

The next day the high school counselors waved us towards their booths in what resembled a carnival-call to a ring toss. Under the yellow dim of flickering and buzzing light fixtures, the exhibit tables draped in cheap, faded cloth displayed hand-drawn posters of study options. I paused briefly at each station: College Preparatory, Science & Technology, General Education, Industrial Arts, and Secretarial Studies. I left my signed permission slip in the last box labeled, *Secretarial Studies.* I had ignored the calls of the counselor to talk more about college options; now I shrugged, turned my back, and felt defeated before I had even begun.

The night before my first day of high school, I had this dream. I was dressed in a thin nightgown and ran, in slow motion, through dark hallways searching for my classes and trying to open doors. No doors opened. I woke covered in sweat and terrified to face the day. I dressed quickly and quietly entered Mom's bedroom. Her room was dark, and the air stale as I fumbled through the sheets to reach her.

"Mom, I'm leaving for school now."

She didn't lift her head from the pillow, as she mumbled, "Okay, don't forget to lock the door." Mom stayed in bed most mornings.

I left the house, locked the door, and locked all her sadness inside. I walked to the bus stop located at the corner of our street. Some would think it convenient, but I didn't. It all felt too close. A group of teenagers gathered at the bus stop, some ate potato chips, others smoked cigarettes, and two guys shared a joint. They glanced at me, said nothing, and turned away. I wore a short, cotton dress with big blue flowers

that mom made from one of her *Simplicity* patterns. On my feet were brown loafers with shiny pennies, an idea I got from an ad in *Teen Magazine*. They wore faded jeans and loose t-shirts with sneakers on their feet. I turned away and vowed never to take this bus, which was one promise that I kept.

It was more than two miles to Gloucester High School, a walk that I made longer by choosing the waterfront streets. I walked past seedy bars that reeked from last night's beer and fish plants that spewed the smell of rotten fish. It felt like hours before I got to the boulevard that morning. I followed the boulevard's path toward the Cut, a narrow stretch of water that separates Gloucester from the mainland. I stood at the bridge's entrance; the base, an open grid of metal, exposed the currents of the sea. The man in the 'keeper's house' closed the drawbridge and a tall man walked toward me. He was draped in a wool blanket and held a book whose title I could not see. He was the strange poet Charles Olson, the one we called the "Indian."

In my arms, I clung to a spiral-ringed notebook with a white index card taped to its cover:

8:00 Typing
9:00 Business Math
10:00 Study
11:00 Shorthand I
12:00 Lunch
1:00 Business English
2:00 Social Studies

He crossed the bridge and nodded as he walked past me. This tall man headed toward the Fort and I detoured to the river's path toward the high school. I didn't know this then, but I would one day circle the places that Charles Olson called home.

At the high school, small groups were scattered throughout the front lawn and in the lot behind the bleachers. Toward the river, another group huddled under the tree. Everyone seemed to know each other or at least knew someone. I walked past the crowds, opened the large glass doors, and entered the lobby. Everything seemed gray, with loud voices echoing off the metal lockers. I edged toward the wall, and just stood until someone jabbed my arm.

"Hey, what's happenin," Frankie said as she strutted toward me wearing a stretchy, tank top and swinging a large saddle bag big enough to feed twelve horses.

"Shit, I don't know."

Frankie did a quick scan of my outfit. "Why did you get all dressed up?"

I had no answer, and she didn't seem to expect one as she changed the subject pretty quickly.

"This place is so fuckin huge, let's go look for Joe." Her head turned in every direction while one hand tugged at her top that kept falling and exposing her breasts.

"It's almost 8:00," I said. "We need to find our classes."

Frankie pulled an index card from her bag and read: "General Math, Home Economics, and Physical Ed. They're crazy if they think I'm going to play some freakin ball game."

On that last threat, we took off in different directions with plans to meet at the flagpole for lunch break. My first class was Typing I, taught by Mrs. Wilson, a retired secretary, who wore a bubble haircut that looked like my old *Barbie* doll. She called us 'young ladies' which was sort of true since there were no guys in the glass. She fiddled a lot with her eyeglasses, lifting them to her face when she read, and then

letting them drop when she was done. There was a silver chain that looked like rosary beads across her neck, which kept her glasses from crashing on the floor. I wasn't sure if her chain was cool or not, but she seemed nice enough. She promised that we would learn to type without looking at the keys. I didn't think this was such a big deal but decided to shut up that day. Our classroom had rows of metal tables lined with dark green, metal typewriters. I sat in the second row crowded with girls and I knew no one. The Business Math class looked like the typewriting class except the metal tables had silver adding machines, big knobs with engraved numbers, and rolls of white ticker-tape that stuck out from the top. This teacher said we would learn to add numbers without looking down at the keys. I was already pretty good at math just using paper and a pen, so not sure what this would teach me. My last class of the morning was Fundamentals of Gregg Shorthand. We sat two to a table and faced a large blackboard with bizarre symbols that substituted for words. All I could think about was this year's top ten record, "Take a letter, Maria, address it to my wife. " The teacher promised that we would learn symbols for words so important *businessmen* could quickly dictate their letter to their secretaries. My future looked packaged up to take a freakin letter from some jerk who would also be my boss.

At noon, I met Frankie by the flagpole on the front lawn. She was eating button mushrooms out of a can that she stole from her Home Economics class.

"I just learned that there are no fucking calories in mushrooms."

I filed this new information as we headed up the short hill to the "smoking" tree, a large Maple about four feet from the Annisquam River. It was high-tide, and two small fishing draggers navigated the currents of the river as they waited for the

drawbridge to open. The boats were in single file as less than twenty feet of water separated Gloucester from the mainland. At the tree, Joe held court with a few guys, between hits off a joint and bragging about some ROTC protest against the Vietnam War. I didn't know about the ROTC and knew little about the war.

"Should we ask them for a hit?" Frankie said as she moved closer to Joe.

"We don't even know those guys and they're gonna think we're just freeloaders."

Frankie just rolled her eyes and gave in. "Whatever, I'll just have a cig." Frankie took a pack of Kool menthols out of her bag and lit one for each of us. I tried not to inhale; smoking always made me dizzy. I was relieved she forgot about the pot.

Joe finally stopped talking and came toward us.

"Hey, what's goin on." Joe said, "Where's Rosa?"

"We haven't seen her yet," I said. "What's up."

He babbled something about needing to tell her about a secret protest. We waved him off and headed back to check out the cafeteria before the end of the lunch break.

In the lobby, the principal was on his hands and knees, scrambling around with a bunch of students, trying to keep them from grabbing the pills that were strewn across the floor. Teachers streamed in from all directions and tried to push the students away. Some guy from the balcony yelled, "They're uppers and downers." This just got more students into the fray.

Man, what a bummer it would be to take downers instead of speed and how could you even tell the difference from these pills. Frankie and I didn't move, and for

once, she was quiet. I wanted to tell her that it might have been better for us if the Catholic High School hadn't closed down. No one would have dared to throw a bag of drugs in front of the Sisters of Mercy. They would have kept order and marched us single-file back to our classes. I didn't say a word. We had left Mercy and this was day one at Gloucester High.

Fish Tales

And Olsen, they now tell me,
is carting fish, for Gorton-Pew,
the lowest job, Gloucester,
the job we all started with

Charles Olson

It was the summer of '68, and Life magazine flooded us with images of Vietnam, hippies, and all kinds of protests. Everyone was marching about something, but I was too busy fretting about my body. I had this fantasy about high school that handsome boys will walk me to classes; I would go to prom and wear a sequined dress: I would be thin, flirty, and free. None of this happened.

"You're not fat, you're chunky," Mom said. "*Sei uno pezzo.*"

She always said my body was one piece—a log— and I never thought that was a compliment. She also predicted I would grow up to look like Rosa, my older cousin, who was flat-chested and carried her weight in her stomach and hips. I didn't want to look like Rosa, and I didn't want to be called "chunky" anymore. Maybe Mom was tired of hearing me complain, or perhaps she really thought I was too fat. I never asked, but before summer's end, I had an appointment with Dr. Curtis. She was our family physician who took care of me when I got the measles and gave Valium to Mom when her headaches kept her on the couch too long. Mom and I sat in the waiting room and flipped through magazines that neither of us read. Finally, the receptionist said, "Doctor will see you now." When I entered the room, Dr. Curtis rose from behind her mahogany desk and greeted me, smiling. I didn't smile back. Her black hair was pulled into a tight bun, and her white coat matched the color of the

walls. I sat at the edge of a black examination table with fluorescent lights glaring down at me. Mom sat in a chair and said nothing. I felt cold and exposed as Dr. Curtis completed her exam.

"Maria is 145 pounds, height 5'4," she said motioning me to step off the scale. "Everything else is normal."

I never asked her what normal meant, but I must have scored abnormally on the fat scale. Dr. Curtis handed me a list of allowable foods and beverages—not to exceed 1000 calories a day—and a "little helper" called Dexedrine. I taped the list to our refrigerator until it became etched in my brain.

Breakfast: Black coffee, ½ grapefruit, ½ cup skim cottage cheese, toast.

Lunch: Diet soda, plain salad, ½ cup tuna or 1 boiled egg, 1 fruit

Dinner: 4 oz. Steak or chicken, steamed vegetables, and 1 fruit.

Snacks: Carrots and celery. 1 small apple or citrus fruit.

No oil, no sugar, no salty snacks

I wasn't sure how many Dexedrine pills I was supposed to take, but it didn't matter since my prescription was easily renewable. When I felt hungry, I would take a few green pills, which kept me from eating, and often kept me from sleeping. I lost twenty pounds that summer, but I didn't lose the feeling of being chunky.

***

Summer started with lots of beach time and hanging out with my girlfriends, hoping to get a sighting of one of our latest boy crushes. The guys called the four of us the *West End Girls*. We hung out on the west side of town with the old Fort in its belly and Pavilion Beach—Pollution Beach to locals—on its borders. We walked the

streets, pretending we had somewhere important to go, but we were aimless and clueless; that is, until Mom made another plan.

"Maria," pausing as she rinsed our dinner plates, 'you gotta work this summer."

"Mom, I'm already babysitting every weekend. " I feared my summer plans would come to an end.

"Not enough. I gotta keep you off the streets and away from boys!"

"Mom, I don't even have a boyfriend."

"You're gonna pack fish this summer."

"Ma, this is my last summer before high school!" I pleaded.

"You're old enough to work," Mom said, not buying into my plead.

"You go pack fish and stink at the end of the day," I yelled with all the might of a teenager under her mother's roof.

"It'll do you good," She said with a satisfied smirk and went back to washing dishes.

Mom sent me to the old Gorton-Pew—the fish plant in the Fort. It spewed the smell of rotten fish and roared from grinding machines that kept the neighborhood sleepless at night. The neighbors complained, but no one listened. The Fort was a broken-down neighborhood with Sicilian immigrants trying to make a living from the sea. Fishermen sold their catch at pennies a pound and were losing ground to foreign fleets. Families were losing too. Our first home, along with other neighboring triple-deckers, was torn down to make space for this plant's delivery trucks.

On my first day, the Boss handed me a sharp knife and never said another word. I stood next to Josie, who cut fish in the plant and grew poppies at her home in the Fort. She was fast with her knives as she slashed the heads and tails of mackerel sloshing in the bins.

I tried to imitate Josie as she held the slimy mackerel down with the palm of her left hand. She brought the blade down swiftly slicing through skin and flesh. The knives scared me, and my fish just kept sliding off the conveyor belt. Josie complained to the boss man that this was no place for a fourteen-year-old who let the mackerel slip through her fingers like silk.

No one ever said I was fired, but the next day I had a new job at Lippmann's, a herring plant on the State Pier. I never learned how my mom managed to find these jobs so quickly, but her drive to keep me away from boys must have been intense.

The fish plant was cavernous, dark, and cold. I took my place at the packing station—a gray metal platform with two rows of tightly packed girls and women. We faced each other like a firing squad, but our eyes never met. Instead, we looked down at the metal rolling station that separated us. We worked with downcast eyes and two hands reaching for fish that sloshed with blood and guts in a stream of frigid seawater. Our hands moved quickly, stacking one-row fillet up, next row fillet down, corners tight, and repeating this pattern until our boxes were packed to the rim. There was an intricate rhythm to this madness. Our boxes rolled down the belt to the men at the end of the line. They smoked as they weighed, and laughed as they carted our work away. They were the fish carters, and "not the lowest job, Gloucester." I wanted that job. Fish packers were the lowest jobs in Gloucester, and I was one of them.

I worked with girls and women whose dreams were mangled like fish in nets. I learned to survive, to live inside my head, to fantasize that I was not at this fish plant. I learned that if I sang all my favorite Grateful Dead songs, ninety minutes would pass. I did division and math in my head. And when I glanced up, the boss man would be glaring down. He sat in a glass-enclosed station perched close to the ceiling, looking down at us. I hated this fucking packing place and hated even more that my mom thought this was good enough for me.

My summer days started at 5:00 a.m., and I dressed in a uniform of worn jeans, a sweatshirt, black rubber boots, and a red bandana around my head. It felt like preparing for war. My aunt, Zi Zi Maria, arrived at 5:20 a. m. in her Chevy and summoned me with one short blast of her horn. She kept the engine running, eyes straight ahead, with hands gripped to the steering wheel for a quick take-off.

This was our routine until one hot summer day in August. I jumped in the car and said my customary "Ciao Zia."

"*Hai mangiato*?" My aunt tilted her head toward the back seat where a metal, rectangular box overflowed with Italian cookies.

"I'm not hungry," I said, staring at more than two hundred cookies in the back seat. There were biscotti filled with almonds and anisette cookies topped with sprinkles, but I just didn't feel like eating.

"Zi, what's going on?" We had enough cookies for a celebration, and she looked like she was going to a wedding.

She wore a brightly colored V-neck dress that cinched her waist and gold jewelry that must have weighed about five pounds. A thick gold chain with a gold

cross and medals of her patron saints—Santa Rosalia, and the Saints Anthony and Christopher—decorated her chest. Her lips were painted in bright pink. Most workdays, she dressed in my uncle's wool pants and red flannel shirts.

"Zi!" I tried again for some explanation, but her blue eyes pierced through me.

"*Mangia*!" Eat she told me, but she meant for me to shut up.

We entered the Lippmann Herring Factory with Zi Zi Maria's arm around my waist, then walked toward the conveyor belt with the fish packers already at the station. I waved good-bye and watched her climb the metal steps that led to a small, platform close to the ceiling. She climbed the steps slowly with her shoulders back, and her head held high. Zi Zi had pulled on a pair of black wool pants under her dress, and men's rubber boots replaced her shoes. A heavy rubber apron, the color of dead skin, protected her clothes, and a bright red scarf covered her hair. This armor didn't protect her from the mocking spray of the guys who pummeled cold water throughout the plant. They hosed down fish and cuts, and any worker who stood in their way. She pulled on thick, textured gloves that would one day prove useless; the day she lost two fingers in the cutting blades. But today, she reigned strong and undefeated. She was a fish-cutter.

Boss said we had to cut, pack, and deliver over 100,000 lbs. of herring before day's end. He worried about the sweltering heat, and I worried that we would be working into the night. Within an hour of the morning shift, I heard Zi Zi yelling, "shut the water" to the maintenance guys.

I looked up, and the water continued gushing, and she was still cutting the heads and tails of fish that descended down her chute.

"Shut the water off!" My aunt's voice rose above the roar of cutting machines. The water was turned off, and the machines came to a grinding halt. Silence now filled our space. She removed her apron, marched down the ladder toward the packing station, and ordered all of us, "Outside now."

"Why?" I asked.

"It's mug-up time," she said as she strode toward the door.

I followed her to the front lot, a worn-out pier filled with discarded fishing gear, broken planks, and seagulls feasting on decaying fish. I squinted, trying to adjust to the glaring sunlight and the scene in front of me. A mob of workers drank coffee from tall thermoses and helped themselves to Zia's heaping pile of cookies.

A radio blasted music, and my aunt sang along to one of her Napolitano favorites when Mr. Lippman, a portly, red-faced man and the owner of the plant, came toward us.

"Everyone, get back to work," he yelled, jumping up and down with fists clenched in the air.

My Aunt took notice, stopped singing, crossed her arms against her chest, and faced him one-on-one.

"We no go back to work." She dismissed him with her customary Italian flip of the wrist under the chin. "We want a union!"

Mr. Lippmann's face was noticeably redder, and I was afraid he would have a heart attack. I didn't like the man, but I also didn't want him to drop dead. I also didn't want my aunt to get in any more trouble. At that moment, a burly man with a clipboard appeared from the back of the fish plant. He strode toward Mr. Lippmann,

stared him down, and announced, "I'm Lou, and I'm with the AFL-CIO. These workers want a union."

My aunt, Lou, and Mr. Lippman walked back into the fish plant, and we got some time in the sun. We returned to work that afternoon with a contract that guaranteed eight-hour workdays, a lunch hour, two fifteen-minute breaks, a women's bathroom, and overtime pay.

Seven years later, this experience inspired me to organize with the AFL-CIO and lead a union campaign for women office workers at Boston College. But on that day, I just felt proud that my aunt had the guts to take on the bosses, fight for our rights, and change the rules of the game between the Boss and the workers in the herring plant.

Crossing the Bridge

To this hour sitting
as the mainland hinge
of the 128 bridge
now brings in
What,
to Main Street?

Charles Olson

My girlfriends and I trudged toward the bridge of Route 128 arguing which one of us had the slut factor capable of quickly hailing down a passing car. It was a hot July day and the traffic heavy with commuters returning from work and tourists leaving our beaches. I yelled above the noise of screeching brakes and blasting horns, "Why don't we just take the freakin train to North Station or bum a ride with Joe."

"What the hell's wrong you, Frankie piped in. "Joe is a jerk and I'm not wasting my money on a train ticket."

"What if no one…" I didn't finish my sentence.

"We're hitching," Frankie made the decision for all of us as my girlfriend nodded in agreement. We raced through two heavy lanes of traffic and scrambled over the side guard rails of Route 128 for safety.

"Who's going hitch?" I asked. I wore faded jeans and a halter top that tied at the neck. Frankie was dressed in low-slung, hip-hugging bell bottoms, a red bandana on her head, and a smaller swatch of cloth that barely covered her chest.

I nodded and nominated her with one quick, "You're it, Frankie!"

"Whatever," she shrugged and strutted toward the highway while the rest of us hid behind the guardrails. She faced the traffic straight on, stretched out her long

arm, and jutted her right thumb toward the highway. In seconds, a red, convertible Mustang screeched to a halt. With two fingers jammed in her mouth, Frankie lets out a loud whistle that was either a siren to run or a signal to join her. We emerged from the tangled mess of high weeds. Frankie was leaning on the door of an idling car. "Hurry up and get in," she yelled. She jumped into the front seat and rode shotgun between two middle aged men with rounded bellies and balding heads. The three of us climbed into the back seat—a scorching inferno of blazing, red vinyl. We barely had time to close the door when the car revved up to ninety miles per hour!

"Where are ya girls goin?" The driver turned his head toward me as I fidgeted to keep my bare back from burning.

"Yah, we scored tickets to the Rolling Stones," I said in my best "Glosta" cool voice. "We need to be at the Boston Garden by 8:00."

Frankie, already in concert mode piped in, "Hey, ya guys wanna smoke?" She lit a fat and perfectly wrapped joint. The driver's head swiveled toward her—ignoring the pot offer—and then to me, ignoring the road which made me really nervous.

"Do ya mothers know?" He yelled. "You girls could be killed, ya know raped. Whatever, you're lucky we picked you up."

I was freaking about his driving and not giving any thought that these two guys could be killers, rapists, or even worse tell our parents. We had fabricated a complex web of lies involving babysitting jobs and sleepovers at each other's houses. Our parents would never have allowed us to attend a concert, especially one in Boston. They didn't trust the world on the other side of the bridge.

"No worries, we're over sixteen." I assured him with a wave of my black-painted fingernails. We also were braless, shoeless, and clueless. These guys got the 'clueless' part and they drove us to the doors of the Garden with one string attached: We promised to take the train back to Gloucester after the concert.

Everyone waited in the car while I went into the ticket office and brought back proof: four, one-way train tickets from North Station to Gloucester.

Then, we thanked these guys and took our final leave of this red chariot to join the throngs of people in North Station. The place reeked of stale beer and urine as we made our way among the streams of commuters, concert goers, sport fans, and scores of homeless people. My heart was beating fast and I had trouble breathing. This was my first concert and I have never left Gloucester without adults. I was in one of my nightmares: trapped in some weird place with no way out.

The place was filled with lighted signs for timetables and train tracks that lead you out of Boston, but no signs for the Garden. Frankie wasn't worried as she slipped away to flirt with two guys bent over a hash pipe.

"Where the fuck is the Garden!" I screamed to the three of them.

"Chill out," Frankie glared at me.

One of the guys raised a finger and pointed to the left, "Just go down that hall with the police at the doors."

We bolted toward the hall and joined the crowd entering the stadium in a tumultuous wave of bandana's and faded denim. I had read that the Garden was originally built for boxing matches. Tex Rickard, the designer and a huge fan of

boxing, positioned the 15,000 seats so crowds would be "close enough to see the sweat on the boxer's brows." I wanted to see the sweat on Mick Jagger.

We found our way to our seats in the first balcony. I realized I wouldn't see Mick's sweat or even his face, but there would be plenty of sweat as the place had no air conditioning. We had first row seats on the balcony. That made me somewhat relieved to have more space, until I peered down to and thought how easy it would be to fall over. Someone passed me a hash pipe so I sat down and went into a haze. It was 9:00 p.m. and the crowd was lighting matches and lifting them to the heavens as we chanted in unison, "Bring on the Stones!"

Instead, Stevie Wonder opened and re-opened as the hours passed with no announcements or sighting of the Stones. I didn't pay too much attention to the music as I was stoned along with everyone else on this balcony. The crowd became louder: my girlfriends and I became quieter. Instead of lit matches, the crowd had fists up in the air. The space was darker, hotter, and closing in on me. At 11:00 p.m., a man took the stage.

"Hello everyone," he said. "I'm Kevin White, Mayor of Boston and I got bad news and I got good news."

"Bad news is that the Stones are in jail."

The place broke out in boos with more fists in the air.

"The good news is that I got them out and they're on their way."

The crowd cheered and screamed, "Bring on the Stones."

Mayor White pleaded for a favor, ""Part of my city is in flames and I'm going to have to take part of the police details out of here ... I need everyone to behave."

I thought it was too late for behaving.

The Mayor promised 15,000 fans that he would deliver the Stones and would keep the trains and subways running throughout the night for free.

"What a bummer, we didn't need to buy those tickets." Frankie blamed me for caving in to our drivers.

The Mayor and policemen exited from the Garden and Frankie thought this was a great time to pass a hash pipe to any takers in our section.

At 12:45 a.m., Mick Jagger strutted onto the stage flashing a dark, purple jumpsuit, white shoes, and a sash around his waist. He leapt into the air and belted into "Brown Sugar." Mick was singing to us. We yelled at the mention "of young girls should" and hugged each other as best friends should. We leapt into the air and sang with Mick every song on their playlist. I was drenched in sweat and euphoric. I screamed to the lyrics of "you can't always get what you," but I got what I needed that night. I was free, alive, and part of a movement that I couldn't name.

We left the station and boarded the train, along with dozens of stoned stoners, back to Gloucester. People were raving about the concert and how the Mayor saved the night. I only heard parts of these conversations. I faded away in sleep, until the train screeched to a halt. I awoke in time to see police running down the aisle to break-up a fight between townies from Gloucester and Beverly. Someone had a knife and had used it. The police were kicking passengers; mostly guys, off the train. The

police glanced at me and my girlfriends. I was now awake and scared. We held our breaths, said nothing, and the police moved down the aisle.

"Shit, we could have gotten busted," Frankie said. "I've got pot in my bag." I was thinking about how not to get busted by our mothers. The train came to a sudden halt. We staggered out to the platform greeted by an early morning light. The air was heavy and you could feel its weight on your skin. The train whistle sounded; the Boston & Maine made its way to its last stop in Rockport. We made our way toward Main Street sorting out a pack of lies and how we would get back into our houses. The rush from the Stones and the pounding lyrics of "Brown Sugar" made my heart beat fast.

"If we get caught, we're screwed," I said to our motley crew.

"Who friggin cares," Frankie said. "We saw Mick!" She started singing "you can't always can't what you want" and screamed "you get what you need!" We got what we needed that night: freedom, excitement, and crossing the boundaries between safety and danger. As friends, we continued to test the boundaries that confined us, and made decisions that eventually separated us as adults.

Losing Ground

Here in the Fort my heart doth
harden,
or my will does, and my
heart
goes
far far
farther

Into the Diagram

Charles Olson

Frankie breezed through the first few months of high school and got lots of attention from guys, Marie dated a senior, and Rosa just obsessed about Joe. I wasn't that interested in guys, or maybe it was because guys didn't seem that interested in me. Anyway, no one paid much attention to me.

Rosa's obsession with Joe started in seventh-grade when she got this wicked crush on Joe, an eighth-grader at St. Anne's School. He was a good-looking guy with thick, black hair and a solid build who now looked pretty good in his ROTC uniform; that is until he got kicked out. On a Friday in late September, Joe ran up to us at the 'smoking tree' where the last handful of students finished off their joints and cigarettes. He wore his ROTC uniform and paced around the tree like a dog who needed to pee.

He finally slowed down and whispered, "I'm leading the ROTC out of here. We're gonna protest against the damn Vietnam War."

I looked over at Rosa, she looked at me, and neither one of us had anything to say about the war or the ROTC.

"Try to get out and watch us. " He hugged Rosa and hustled down the hill.

Rosa and I bailed out of study hall that day and caught a glimpse of the last row of brown-uniformed guys marching through the parking lot. They sang, "You can't get rich, you son of a bitch, you're in the army now," a song that stayed in my brain for days. They marched through the parking, over the hill, and just kept going. Not one of them returned to school that day. The protest made frontpage news in the *Gloucester Daily Times*, our local newspaper, and made an impression on Rosa as well. Rosa's mother, Giovanna, never learned about the ROTC or the front-page article in the Times. None of our parents learned about the protest since they didn't bother to buy newspapers that they couldn't read.

We had no books in our house except for the books I borrowed from the library and a collection of Life Magazine. Before the end of Freshman year, I convinced my mom to buy the *World Book* encyclopedia, an investment that she would pay off in monthly installments over the next two years. Years later, I felt guilty about causing this financial burden. My guilt lessened by watching Dad read through those volumes in his older years: he challenged me to answer questions about countries around the world, places that he never visited. Many years later, after my dad has passed, and my mom had lost her sight, I discarded these books, with other possessions my parents used to own, in a local dumpster. I regret abandoning these gold-paged volumes that found no place in my home.

As a freshman, I also convinced my mom to pay for a Doubleday Book Club subscription. Each month, an order form arrived in the mail with selections under various categories: Classics, Mysteries, History, Biographies, and Romance. I ordered from the Classics and collected books from Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Salinger. I read to escape and enter worlds that were not like mine. I also read through nights when I couldn't sleep; this was becoming more frequent.

A battle brewed inside me, one that I couldn't name or win. Sometimes, I didn't even know who or what I was fighting: Mom, School, Gloucester, or Myself. I felt like two people. The girl who read lots of books, loved learning about places and people, and worked hard at her jobs. The other one was the girl who often gave-up on herself. I had purchased a used Canon camera and enrolled in a local photography class at a community center. The instructor inspired me to see the magic of the world through the lens of the camera. The Fort was a magnet and I captured the early morning light in my photographs of the piers, wooden draggers, and abandoned fishing gear. Black and white scenes of our fishing industry emerged in my rudimentary dark room in the basement. Mom typically slept until mid-morning which left me free to roam until one Saturday.

"Where have you been?"

"Just down at the Fort taking pictures with my camera," I said placing my gear on the dining room table."

"Only a *butana* would go down to the wharf in the early mornings." She raged, "Who did you meet down there?"

Her rage grew into blows as she repeatedly struck my arms and cheeks. I crumbled into the closest chair and sobbed uncontrollably. I was barely able to breathe, but it wasn't her blows that upset me.

"Mom. I'm not a whore, and I wasn't looking for anyone," I said between sobs, "Honest. I just want to take pictures."

"You're a liar."

No words would change her mind. I went down to the basement, drained the liquid from the development trays, pulled my photos from the clothesline, and shoved the camera in the back of my closet.

Thirty years later, my mother remembered that day.

"I thought something was wrong with you," she confessed. "I worried people would call you a prostitute for walking down at the docks in the early morning. "

I thought of launching into all my regrets and the things that I couldn't do, places I couldn't join because it either looked bad, or it was American, or both, but it didn't matter anymore.

"Mom, prostitutes don't work in the mornings," I laughed. "They don't carry cameras with them either."

"Maria, I was just worried," she said. "You were different, and I didn't understand you."

My Sophomore year didn't change very much except that my courses added the Roman numeral II to its titles. In Gregg Shorthand II and Typewriting II, I got awards for accuracy and speed, which was pretty lame. Frankie and I got waivers

from Physical Ed; she didn't like the bulky uniforms, and I didn't like my body. We easily forged signatures from parents who had minimal reading skills. I simply took the waiver form home, gave Mom a pen, and said sign *here* as she raised her head from the pillow.

"*Mai che e*?"— what is it—asked Mom.

"Sign on this line, so I don't have to play ball games." For once, this was the truth.

Without Physical Ed, my schedule contained four classes and a bunch of study halls with nothing to study. I felt bored and trapped and used my Dexedrine to give me bouts of excitement, but it wasn't working very well. I also was terrified of gaining weight and being called, 'chunky.' I downed three or four Dexedrine tablets a day and barely felt the rush.

By the second year of high school, everyone belonged to groups defined by their clothing. The *Preppies* wore khaki-slacks with pastel-colored golf shirts; the *Jocks* sported tight-fitting t-shirts and Levi's, the *Flossie* girls squeezed into short skirts and rimmed their eyes with black eyeliner, while the *Druggies* strutted in low-slung, bell-bottomed jeans with bandannas on their heads. I just migrated to the groups that talked to me.

Except for my three girlfriends, no one paid much attention to me until Sal came into our scene. He was a few years older, but I don't remember him going to school or even working. Everyone just knew him as "Sal" the short, dark-skinned guy with a stocky build who hung out in the Fort. He became our shadow. After school, he took my girlfriends and me for pot-filled car rides, and at nights, we regrouped to

play music, drink, and smoke whatever he gave us at Pavilion Beach, the townie's beach in the Fort. On one of those nights, he took out a small packet wrapped in aluminum foil.

"You'll like this more," Sal said.

"More than what?" I asked.

"More than your diet pills."

The packet was perfectly folded and looked like the flag given to families for their fallen soldiers. He carefully unwrapped the package, sprinkled its contents on a square mirror, and with a razor's edge, divided this white powder into four equal lines. Sal rolled a dollar bill into a tight straw, closed one nostril, and snorted one line of the white powder up his nose. He handed the dollar bill to each of my two girlfriends who repeated his performance. When it was my turn, I copied the others and placed the bill in my nose, put my head down, and snorted the entire line. I looked down into the mirror, powderless and powerless, and met my eyes whose blueness was replaced by the blackness of dilated pupils. The rush of speed was instant and sent a bolt of energy throughout my body. This was crystal methamphetamine, *speed*, and I felt a burst of life. I also had this feeling of losing something inside me. I learned too late that the *something* was about caring, about caring about myself.

It was easy to get packets of crystal meth that I kept hidden in the corners of my room, but it was impossible then, and still difficult now to understand the damage of this addiction. I was oblivious to the dangers and to the signs of addiction:

although, I had lost weight, hair, and several teeth. I fainted frequently, I slept even less, and no one noticed.

I became less interested in high school, and Mom became less interested in life. She laid on the couch more often with a damp, white facecloth covering her eyes. Valium had become her companion. On those days, "*Sono malatta*, I am sick," is all she said. She coped with life by shutting down and closing off emotions with her drugs. I now recognize that we both shared the need to escape, but the words *addiction* and *withdrawal* had not entered into our vocabulary.

My demands for independence and exploration escalated into rages that left us both exhausted; her rages were physical and fierce as she tried to beat the American out of me.

"*Non chi abastanza soldi*" or "*Ci sono 'mericano*," she said. We either didn't have enough money, or there would be Americans at the places that I wanted to explore. It was in one of those rages, that I understood the depth of my failure.

"Mom, why did you adopt me if you can't stand me," I screamed.

"Maria, I adopted a daughter for company."

"For COMPANY," I yelled between sobs. "Give me back."

I ran to the living room and huddled in the corner of our sofa.

"What do you want from me." I pleaded.

"I want you to help me, to marry an Italian," she added, "To live near me."

I knew then that I have failed.

We were tethered with a delicate string that broke loose with the slightest form of tension. We moved away from each other, abandoning each other, and ourselves. We came back together, again and again, trying to make each other whole.

whose slaver
would keep you off the sea, would keep you local
my Nova Scotians,
Newfoundlanders,
Siclianos,
Isolatos

Isolated person in Gloucester, Massachusetts, I, Maximus, address you
you island
of men and girls

Charles Olson

The boredom of school was unbearable. Frankie and I learned about a 'work release' program where one could opt out of study hall, gym, and lunch; that is, if you had a job. I thought of prisoners who get early release when they exhibit good behavior, but at Gloucester High, student behavior wasn't part of the approval process. It was easy to convince our mothers to sign the form for 'work release' as they agreed with us that sitting in a room with nothing to do was a waste of time, and eating *mericano* food would be awful. I didn't know about the food since I never ate school lunches, but the study halls were a joke. We also had to verify financial hardship in the family, and agree to the terms that the student would not be enrolled in a full course of study. I didn't read the agreement section to my mother. I later felt badly for taking advantage of her in that way, but that day I couldn't believe my luck: I would be out of school before noon for the rest of high school.

I got a job as a part-time cashier at Mel's Department Store, but I don't remember Frankie working. My family thought Mel's was a great career because my

hands stayed 'clean.' In retrospect, it was a step-up from packing fresh herring. Rosa's family planned her school release program. Rosa and Joe were 'going out' for about a year when her family discovered that he was "*mericano*," raised by a divorced and single mother, with no trace of Italian blood. Rosa was grounded, and the only place she could go to was my house.

"Maria, my mother won't let me go out with Joe," Rosa cried. "I'm running away from them."

"You're fifteen," I reminded her as if she needed any reminders. "Where the hell do you think you can go?"

"It's worse than you think," Rosa circled around my room. "My mother and brothers fixed me up to marry some guy from Sicily. He's in his twenties, a friggin old man."

"Can't you just say no." I was frightened for her.

"My mom thinks he will be a good provider. She's all upset and wants me *sistemata* before she dies."

Our mothers, more than anything, wanted us to be settled in life.

In a matter of months, Rosa was engaged to Paulo, and the wedding date was set for June, just four months after her sixteenth birthday. Before the wedding, we crammed into her house to be photographed. Endless photographs that showed the new bride in various stages of getting ready for her groom.

Rosa wore a white, beaded satin gown and a silver tiara on her head with a thin, white veil that would cover her face when she walked down the aisle. After all this makeup and fuss, we wouldn't even see her face when she walked down the aisle.

The back of her dress had a mass of fabric tied in elaborate folds. This was her train, and it trailed more than twenty feet. As maid of honor, I wore a green sleeveless gown, embroidered lace around the collar, and a cone-shaped hat with a little white veil poking out of it. For bouquets, the bridesmaids and I carried fake umbrellas, made of Styrofoam that overfilled with a bunch of fake flowers.

The photographs took forever, but Rosa was moving slow. She didn't look like she was in a hurry. At 2:45, a big white limousine pulled in front of the house to drive Rosa and me across the street to the church. It would have been faster and easier to walk.

When the organ started its entrance hymn, Rosa gripped my arm and said,

"Look out the door and see if Joe is out there."

"I don't see him, Rosa. "Maybe it's too hard for him."

We turned around and proceeded down the aisle with me just a few steps ahead of her. Everyone rose and oohed and aahed, but I felt like an idiot in this outfit. We took our time walking down the aisle that seemed to have grown twice in length. The organ eerily echoed in the chambers and reminded me of a score from Dracula. Paulo and his best man stood rigid by the altar and looked solemn as we approached them.

I thought of picking up the pace, but decided against it as keeping time with this music was impossible. I kept glancing back at Rosa to make sure she hadn't fallen too behind, and a part of me wished she would run the other way.

We had walked down this aisle so many times: First Holy Communion, Confirmation, Sunday masses, special processions, and family funerals; today, it all felt different.

As the maid of honor, it was my job to be by her side, keep her calm, and, most importantly, keep her from tripping over that train. At the altar, I stood beside her and took charge of her bouquet, gave her little smiles so she wouldn't break down crying. I read from the Bible, a passage from Corinthians that said *you don't have love, you are like a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.* It felt like a strange way to describe the lack of love.

During the ceremony, I bent up and down, trying to keep that damn train from tangling every time she knelt, sat, or stood. I managed to keep her from tripping, but not sure if I delivered on my support role.

Rosa managed to get through the mass, the vows, and the first kiss as *man and wife*. Paulo had a big grin on his face, but Rosa wasn't smiling. They walked down the aisle, arm in arm, Paulo still grinning, and Rosa not looking at anyone.

Already, she seemed different, older to me, and this confused me. I knew she didn't want to get married, but her mother and older brothers convinced her that she would have a good life with an Italian man who "came from a good family." She didn't need to finish high school since her brothers all said: "He would be a good provider. " I hoped they were right.

After the ceremony, we drove to the reception at Caruso's banquet hall. It was on Route 1 in Saugus and looked like a strip mall. Inside, the massive foyer was filled

with ornate, white columns, with plaster replicas of Greek gods and goddesses lining the walls.

Rosa did all the right bride things. She danced with her father to *Daddy's Little Girl*, and when the song stopped, he kissed her gently on the cheek and returned to his seat without a smile. As the night closed, the staff wheeled out a six-tiered cake decorated with pink and blue flowers and topped with plastic figures of a bride and groom. Paulo put his hand over hers—as if she couldn't cut the cake on her own—and they cut two precise pieces of cake. She smashed a modest bit in Paulo's face, and he did the same. After the cake smashing, Rosa found me.

"Maria, I want you to catch the bouquet," she said. "It's good luck, and you might be next to get married." She told me to get behind her and stay to the far right. "I will throw right to you."

The thought of catching those flowers and having some jerk run a garter up my leg in front of two hundred people scared the shit of me. And what if the prediction came true and I was next to marry. I didn't want that kind of luck even though I didn't have much going for me. Maybe, getting married would be better than living at home.

The band started a drum roll. Rosa threw the bouquet into the air, right in my direction. I bent down, pretending to pick it up but instead kicked it over to the girl next to me. She grabbed the bouquet and waved it in the air as white roses, and green ferns fell onto the dance floor. Rosa's eyes narrowed as she mouthed, "Why didn't you grab it."

"Sorry." I shrugged.

I went to the back bar and ordered a highball with Canadian Club.

With a drink in hand, I returned to the dance floor with the hope of making amends, but Rosa was not in sight. I just stood and listened to another round of lousy music when Rosa reappeared in a white, tailored suit that shined under the crystal chandelier. Her long black hair was tucked into some kind of Jackie Kennedy pillbox hat, and a huge pink orchid hung cockeyed on her chest. She looked old. Paulo had changed into a gray suit, and he looked even older. It was almost midnight, and the crowds gathered for the final good wishes as they kissed the bride and shook hands with the groom. Then, we exited the hall and drove to the hotel at Logan Airport.

During the drive, I fixated on her outfit and tomorrow's plane ride to Italy for their honeymoon. Last time, Rosa went to Italy was with me at the age of eight.

"Rosa, are you going to wear that suit tomorrow? You should wear jeans."

"I didn't pack them." That's all she said.

The car ride made me nervous as I didn't know the best man, a recent immigrant from Sicily, who worked as a fisherman in Gloucester. I didn't know Paulo either, so I babbled all about Sicily.

"Rosa, remember how our relatives had connected houses in Terrasini. We would climb over the rooftops to play with each other. Wow, I can't believe we were there for six months."

No one said anything. The best man, kept his hands on the wheel, Rosa slid to the side door, and Paulo kept inching toward her. When we got to the hotel, the best man opened a bottle of champagne and poured four glasses for a toast. Rosa shoved

me in the bathroom with her.

"Please don't leave," She begged. "Don't leave me alone."

"Rosa, what do you want me to do," I pleaded. "Paulo won't let me stay here."

I thought of ways to get us out of there but couldn't figure out an exit plan. We were in a high-rise hotel, there were no windows in this bathroom, and the only door was right next to her new husband.

"I'm still a virgin," She said.

"Me, too."

The ride back to Gloucester felt like an eternity. My best friend was in a hotel room with a guy that she wants to run away from, but he looked happy and in love. I hoped he would be kind, and that she would grow to love him. Everyone in my family congratulated Rosa for her good luck in getting a nice Italian man for a husband, but what they really meant was *why couldn't this be happening to Maria.* Why can't she just get married and settle down. It was this 'settling down' that scared me, made me feel like I would settle for less. Yet, my life was a mess and my choices weren't so great. Maybe, getting married would make me feel less lonely.

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Even with early release, it all felt like a dead-end. I was bored with typing and shorthand, not involved with any school activities or clubs, and felt different from most people in the high school. They talked about proms, dating, and college plans. No one ever asked me to a prom. I didn't have a boyfriend, and I wasn't going to

college. My friends and I just circled around town looking for the next chance to get high.

One day, it all felt too much. "Mom, I'm not learning anything in school."

"What do you want now?" She asked keeping her eyes on the television.

"I want to quit."

It's wasn't much of a fight or maybe the soap opera, "Days of Our Lives" was more interesting. Mom just said, "If you quit then go to work full-time."

I said, "OK" and walked out of the living room.

Graduation

The great Ocean is angry. It wants the Perfect Child.

Charles Olson

My 1972 yearbook shows a photo of a girl with her blue eyes staring at the camera, a stoic expression on her face; her pupils dilated from speed. She looks foreign to me as does the caption underneath the photo in which I wrote something like, 'learn from your mistakes and cherish the happiness in living,' but that was all bullshit. I would like to dismiss those four years and pretend that they didn't happen. I would like to write that I was a good student, highly-motivated, and positioned for success, but that would be a lie. I was lost, wasted, and a part of me had given up.

I sat with the crowd with a blue cap and gown on a hot and cloudless day. We were cramped on the football field, family and friends were perched on wooden bleachers looking down on us. My mom, who hates heights, sat in one of the lower benches, and Dad was somewhere out at sea.

"Maria, we got to go out when the weather's good," he said. "I got a ten-man crew to feed."

"That's alright, Dad," I said and I meant it. Dad just wouldn't feel comfortable in this place. He "graduated" from the fifth-grade in Sicily and never stepped into a school again. "I'm a working man," he often said.

A student I didn't know with long blond hair, a white robe, and a gold sash across her chest gave an 'I have a dream speech.' She told us how we would change the world, and everyone cheered her on with whoops of joy. Frankie, who sat next to

me, just rolled her eyes and kept smacking gum. I didn't get up. I didn't clap. I wouldn't be changing anything: I couldn't even change myself.

The ceremony felt like an eternity as we watched more than a thousand students in our class walk up to the stage, everyone graduating, except for Rosa, my best friend. Frankie and I kept fidgeting in our chairs and reminded each other to take the diploma with your left hand and shake the principal's hand with your right. All of this pageantry finally came to an end. We stood up and sung our closing song by James Taylor," When you're down and troubled, and you need …"

I was down and troubled and if wasn't for Mr. Wise, I wouldn't be sitting here today. I had quit school in my senior year and pulled together several part-time jobs that included another stint at the fish factory. I didn't talk to any counselors about this decision, and no one talked to me. About a month later, I had returned to the school and visited Mr. Wise who taught social studies, the only class that held my interest. It was the end of the day and he was erasing the chalkboard when I entered the classroom. He stopped erasing and rushed over to me.

"Where have you been?" He asked with kindness.

"I've been working, I said clutching the books to my chest.

"But I haven't seen you in class for weeks," he said looking at me intently with blue sparkling eyes.

I handed over our class books, '1984' and 'Brave New World" and told him that I had quit.

"Oh, my dear," his said. "You have a beautiful mind." His eyes had less of a sparkle now.

No one has ever said that I have a beautiful mind. Tears welled and I tried hard not to cry.

"You are a thinker and minds like yours go to college." Mr. Wise frowned and shook his head. "You must come back to school."

"My parents won't allow me to go to college," I said with all the frustration that had built up in me.

"You will find your path, he said. "There are many ways to become educated."

I returned to school touched by the kindness of one man who thought I had a *beautiful mind*. Mr. Wise believed in me. Like a prayer, I repeated his words over and over again. Something changed inside me, and I began to believe in myself. I now needed my parents to believe in me as well.

The lyrics of the James Taylor song, *when you need a helping hand, just call out*..., kept playing in my head. I needed a lot, but there was no one to call. After graduation, nothing much changed for my girlfriends and me that summer. I shoved my diploma in my sock drawer and went back to packing fresh herring at the plants during the week, and ringing up cheap plastic crap at Mel's Department Store on weekends. Mom would not allow me to attend college, and my dad went along with what she said. College was unfamiliar, and not in our vocabulary.

Two days after graduation, I returned to the fish plant. It was all familiar to me now, damp and dark, where the only natural light to enter the space came from the missing shingles off the roof. I could be invisible in this plant.

I didn't have to think about dressing up as my outfit was a thick and yellowed rubber apron. high-water rubber boots. and a red bandana around my head. I took my place at the metal station, squeezed between two rows of tightly packed women and girls. Sophie was on my right and her mother to my left. She looked up at me without pausing her work.

"So, you came back." She nodded with a side glance at me. "Didn't you get a diploma."

It wasn't a question. so I didn't answer her. I just put on my gloves and started packing herring fillets that streamed down the conveyor belt. It was only 8:00 a. m. and we had more than 80.000 pounds of fish to pack before we could leave today. It didn't take long for boredom to seep in and suck the life out of me.

I tried singing all the Grateful Dead songs that I knew to pass the time. but that was working for me anymore. The sounds of metal clashing from the cutting machines. and the screeches of forklifts made conversation or even thinking impossible. When I did think about my life, it felt wasted. My thoughts raced with the speed. and my body couldn't rest. This was as good as it gets in Gloucester, I told myself. The drug crisis had escalated and claimed the lives of friends around me. Drugs had taken its hold. and a toll on me, and that both frightened and motivated me. I needed to leave in order to survive.

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I want to rush through the rest of this story and pretend that none of this happened, but this is my truth, the story of my family, and the story of my town. I need to give voice to these lives, to the events that almost destroyed my life, but sucked up others like a relentless vacuum. Lives that disappeared overnight into the silence of our community. I write to understand this waste of life, the power of addiction, and the consequences of abandonment.

Our Sicilian community was formed by the strength of immigrant woman and men who left family, culture, and all that was familiar to forge a live in a foreign land. They left for only one reason: to give their children a life better than the one they left behind. This reads like a cliché, but it is the story of immigrants. Courageous men, women, and children who cross our borders today, and the ones who sailed on ships to our shores. Our men were fishermen, who worked on wooden draggers and faced treacherous seas that often had more power than their vessels. They were men of faith and strength; not the men of alcohol and drug abuse. Our women were the matriarchs managing households, finances, and children without men. They were fearless with one exception: they didn't want their children to become '*mericano's.*

I write about this fear as it may help to illuminate the drug crisis that cast a shadow in our City, and a silence among our own. I also write about this to illuminate something in me. In high school, we were defined by the substances we chose or didn't: Straights, Speed Freaks, Acid Heads, Pot Heads, and Junkies. It was mostly the *junkies* that died. They met in the dark, blue Chevy parked on the hill in view of the bleachers and the football players who practiced their game. In this car, the game

was controlled by the supplier who used a brown leather belt, worn and supple, to tie around thin, young arms outstretched for, and it is this "for" that I lack words. I lost count of how many died in Gloucester, but I lost four of my friends. They were sons of fishermen from our Sicilian community, died before they finished high school. Our families shook their heads in disbelief and only said, "and they came from good families." They could not reconcile how children of *good* families could die from illegal drugs.

They overdosed or died by the adverse symptoms of strychnine. To write this page, I researched strychnine and learned about how the body dies. The muscles go into spasms that start with the head and spread to every muscle in the body with continuous convulsions. Death comes from asphyxiation caused by paralysis of the neural pathways that control breathing, or by exhaustion from convulsions. Death usually occurs within two – three hours after exposure. We never talked about the death; we acted as if they simply disappeared. I didn't attend any wakes, funerals, or burials. I searched for their graves and didn't find them. Silence.

In writing this story, I tried to understand my own. I researched medical journals and learned that Dexedrine 'should be prescribed sparingly' because of its high potential for abuse. 'Dexedrine is highly addictive; that is, addiction can occur within a week.' Continued stimulant abuse results in the atrophy and destruction of brain cells. The destruction of these cells makes it more difficult to experience pleasure and, in turn, causes the person to crave more of the drug to find pleasure. This vicious cycle can lead to *anhedonia*, a condition *'where a person is unable to experience pleasure and sets the stage for depression and suicide.'* I don't have the

courage to research crystal methamphetamine. I was young, my bones hurt, my stomach ached, and my brain was on fire. I don't blame the doctor or my mother for this addiction, but I regret not understanding the power of this drug and its damage on me. As a teenager, I was blind to the power of addiction and ignorant about its consequences. I have struggled to find peace with this period in my life, and continue to feel sadness that no one ever noticed this young girl's pain. I was invisible to those who loved me.

Apart

& I go off
a last time
to leave
the bridge from

Charles Olson

I crossed over the steel arched bridge that towers above the Annisquam River, the bridge that separates Gloucester from the mainland, and separates me from Gloucester. Through the rearview mirror, I glimpsed the brilliant sky and the shimmering, gray steeple of St. Anne's Church towering over the narrow streets and tightly packed houses. My mother told me not to come back, as my father sat silent and confused, my grandmother heavy with grief. I parted with them in hopes of saving myself.

The night before, I'd packed for my first apartment, a word that in Italian means *appartare* 'to separate' or to be 'apart.' This separateness now defined me. I packed two suitcases with clothes, a wooden crate filled with my collection of Rolling Stones and Grateful Dead records, and a larger crate of books and placed them by the front door. I was not allowed to take any other items from our home. I paced throughout the house, stopping frequently to look through the curtains for my ride. Mom was in the bedroom opening and slamming shut the drawers of her bureau.

"Mom, what are you doing?"

"I found it!" she shouted as she handed me a white piece of paper. "You think you're so independent, then pay your own bills."

I took the $550.00 bill for my dental work without saying a word. I was in debt before I even started my new job. My spirits were broken as well, and I couldn't stop thinking about the argument we'd had.

Mom and I were in the kitchen. She had her back to me as she washed the last few dishes from our evening meal. I sat on the corner stool searching for the words to tell her about my plans. When words didn't come, I opened the envelope in my hand and read from a letter embossed with an elegant seal.

"We are pleased to inform you that have been accepted to Boston State College…"

Mom whipped around with a fierceness that frightened me. She struck both of my cheeks, her hands were hot and wet, and the sting pierced through me.

"You think ya better than us." She yelled as she spat onto my face.

"Mom," I pleaded between sobs. I was crying to be understood and crying because I felt so dirty and ashamed. No one had ever spit on me.

"Mom, I got a full-time job as a secretary and will go to college at nights."

Hearing the word 'college' ignited her fury again.

"You'll lose your religion, do drugs, and become a *puttana."*

I was already losing my faith, drugs had a suffocating hold on me, but I was not a whore. I clutched my letter and waved it toward her, a fragile symbol of triumph. Looking back, I will question if I could have planned this separation more gently, for her and for me. I don't resolve this conflict; I believe that she will carry the pain of my leaving for the rest of her life.

I drove to our new apartment in Somerville with Susan and Debbie—two friends I met at Chandler, a 'finishing school' for girls in Boston. The word 'finishing' made me think that I was undone and needed completion. I believe that was true. For nine months I commuted from Gloucester to Chandler intent on securing a secretarial certificate that would be my passport to a new life. My mother had reluctantly agreed to this program, but she had no idea I was applying to college and for jobs in Boston. It was wrong of me not to tell her, but I knew of no other way out.

Somerville was a working-class city, and more affordable than neighboring Cambridge. Our apartment had an air conditioner, and a full kitchen, including a dishwasher. I had never used a dishwasher. I didn't know if there were dishes or pans in the apartment, or who would cook and clean. Susan and Debbie didn't seem worried about any of this. That first night, we celebrated our friendship with red wine, runny brie, and a French baguette. Susan had changed into new jeans and a fitted white blouse with rolled up sleeves. She'd spent lots of time putting on make-up and blow-drying her long golden-brown hair. They smoked thin cigarettes and drank from long-stemmed wine glasses as they talked about old boyfriends and the new guys who wanted to date them.

I imitated their movements, balancing a wine glass in my hand, but I felt clumsy and awkward. The taste of wine reminded me of nights spent on Pavilion Beach, gulping Wild Irish Rose straight out of the bottle in between long hits of pot. Frankie always stole the wine from Richdale's, the variety store on the Boulevard, by flirting with the clerks.

Deb had a strange accent and looked different than most of my Gloucester girlfriends. She wore tight hip-huggers and had powder-blue eyeshadow on her lids. She was from Maine, a place that I had never visited. As we drank wine, Deb offered advice on how to date several guys at the same time.

"I set aside certain nights for each guy," she said. "Rick gets Saturday nights, and guys I don't like as much get the middle of the week."

I didn't have one boyfriend. I didn't even have a bed. I spent my first night in that apartment on the living room floor, covered by a blanket I borrowed from Susan.

The next day Susan and I drove to her family home in Waltham to get items for our kitchen. Waltham was a suburban town, about thirty minutes away from our place in Somerville. Susan's white house had a black iron eagle over the door, and there was an American flag waving from the barn.

"Why do you have a flag out?" I asked. "It's not the Fourth of July."

"We keep a flag out all year," she said, shrugging her shoulders as if everyone kept flags flying all year 'round.

The only time my family waved flags was during St. Peter's Fiesta. Gramma and Grandpa would sit in beach chairs at the corner of their street waiting for the procession. When St. Peter's statue passed by them, Gramma and Grampa waved little American flags and yelled, "*Viva, Viva, Viva San Pietro*!"

"Your house is really nice," I said, hoping she wasn't offended by me questioning her flag.

"Our house is an antique colonial built in the 1700s," Susan said as she waved her arm toward the barn and the large open fields.

My family would have hated to live in a house this old, with no sidewalks, and big fields all around them. There was no place to walk, and not a grocery store, church, or bakery in sight. My family yelled out the windows to each other and crowded together on the steps of our front doors. Susan's family had to get into a car and drive to see anyone.

Their small kitchen had white metal cabinets on one wall and an enameled sink under the windows. The kitchen table was only large enough for two people. Her father sat at one end of it and rose when we entered the room. He was tall, with sparkling blue eyes, and silver hair.

"Congratulations, Maria," he said shaking my hand. "We are impressed that you are going to college."

"It's just night college," I said. It felt strange to hear a parent congratulate me on anything, especially college.

"College is important, he said. "Our son is at Harvard studying Slavic Languages."

I didn't know what type of job you would get by studying Slavic languages, but I was impressed that their son went to Harvard.

"Our Susie is smart with numbers," he sighed. "I wish *she* would go to college."

Susan rolled her eyes, grabbed my arm, and pulled me out of the kitchen.

"Let's start packing so we can get out of here."

I wasn't in a hurry to leave. Her dad wanted to chat, her mother wanted to give me tea, and the whole house felt inviting. I followed Susan to the dining room, a

small, dark space with walls papered in faded lanterns and small Chinese figures. There was a dark, oval-shaped table with a matching cabinet that displayed porcelain birds, crystal wine glasses, and a collection of white teacups with little green shamrocks. Susan called this collection 'Belleek.' A piano with books of music stood in the right corner.

"Do you play the piano?" I asked.

"My mother made me take lessons all my life," Susan added, "I couldn't stand it."

"Wow, that's cool," I said. Susan just kept packing.

"Susan, did you really eat dinner in this room?" I asked, imagining a scene with lighted candles and sparkling crystal.

"Yup, we ate here every night," Susan said. "You would hate my mother's cooking. She uses ketchup for tomato sauce."

I imagined a bowl of steaming spaghetti and wondered if her mother would heat the ketchup or pour it from the bottle. I didn't ask. Susan was already at the door with two boxes filled with silver-plated flatware, two brass candlesticks, a crystal vase, curtains, and an assortment of pans and dishes. We went back to the kitchen to say good-bye. Her mom was cutting the crust from thinly sliced white bread. I was puzzled why she throw out the best part of bread. She was wearing a short-sleeved cotton dress with a short apron tied around her waist. It didn't seem necessary to wear an apron just to make tuna fish sandwiches. When we left, her mom gave me a gentle hug.

"You have beautiful blue eyes, like Susie," her mom said. "I wish she wouldn't wear all that eye make-up and be more natural like you."

I was not sure about the "more natural" part and whether it really meant my looks were dull. I wanted to look more like Susan.

On our drive back home, I thought about how different my life would be if I was raised by Susan's parents, but she didn't seem to fit any better with her adopted family than I did with mine. We were both misfits in our families.

Susan's life would become difficult, and she would barely survive two abusive husbands. Years later, we talked about our mothers, the rages we didn't understand, and the disappointment they felt about us. Susan told me that her mother always loved me. I told her my mother didn't like anyone.

We didn't speak about our turbulent marriages. She lost trust: I found great love. I thanked her for supporting me in my decision to leave Gloucester, and she reminded me of the drugs and her prediction that if I had stayed, I would have dropped dead.

In the summer of 1973, the three of us started jobs as secretaries. Susan and Debbie drove to their offices in the Financial District of Boston while I walked from our apartment in Somerville, taking a short cut across Harvard Yard, to the subway station at the Square. I passed clusters of students, their arms filled with books, talking excitedly among themselves, using hand gestures, nodding in agreement. Their voices sounded different than mine; refined, with words clearly articulated. I dropped 'r's at the end of words and added 'r's where they didn't belong. I imagined attending classes in one of the ivy-covered buildings and living in a red-bricked dorm. But I didn't belong there.

I worked at the Home Savings Bank in Copley Square across the street from Trinity Church. The area was covered with an elaborate structure of scaffolding to protect pedestrians from glass panes that regularly fell from the John Hancock Tower. This tall glass skyscraper was nearly complete, but an engineering error caused its five hundred-pound windowpanes to detach and crash to the sidewalk hundreds of feet below. Eventually, more than one thousand panes would need to be replaced. That year we were forced to walk under sheaths of plywood that blocked any glimpse of sky or light. There was not much light on the job either, as I worked in a windowless office in the basement of the old YWCA building.

My boss, Mr. Watson, Vice President of the Mortgage Department, was a short man who wore dark three-piece suits with a gold pocket watch tucked in his vest pocket. He pulled out his watch every fifteen minutes. I wondered if he was bored too. His office had glass walls so he could peer at me work throughout the day.

I sat at the front of the secretarial pool and behind me were three desks, set up in classroom style, one behind the other. We reported to men with important titles: Vice President, Assistant Vice-President, Loan Officer, Trust Officer. They worked in offices behind glass walls that offered them views of us 'girls' that worked for them. Our titles: secretary, clerk, typist. None of us got to know each other since we stared at each other's backs and had to take our breaks at separate times. Men behind glass walls staring at us while we worked reminded me of the fish plant and my former boss who perched in his glass tower glaring at the fish packers.

This job wasn't much better than working in a fish plant. I spent my days filling out endless forms and waiting for my lunch hour. Our department wasn't doing much in the mortgage area; instead, we concentrated on foreclosing properties on poor, primarily black people, who lived in neighborhoods surrounding Boston. The bosses assigned the *girls* to call and threaten homeowners with evictions if they didn't make their payments on time. There wasn't much room for negotiation. Clerks would tell homeowners how sorry they were if someone was ill or lost their jobs, but at the end of the day, their job was to get the mortgage payment. There were times that homeowners would come to the bank and plead for mercy, but it didn't do much good.

I occasionally took dictation from Mr. Watson, but he didn't have much to say about anything. One day he said, "If you wear a dress, I will take you to a foreclosure with me."

"I have a long walk and a subway ride every day," I said dismissing his offer. "Pants are just more comfortable."

I never learned how the actual foreclosure was handled, but I knew that people were losing their homes and their dreams. It all felt so wrong. There was nothing a secretary could do to alleviate this level of anguish.

That summer, I started night school at Boston State College. Our classes were held in the old Park Square Gas Company, a concrete structure that had no campus or ivy-covered buildings. I learned later that my program was called the Harvard for the working class. I bought a large spiral-bound notebook with four tabs printed in my best handwriting: English Composition, Introduction to Sociology, Fundamental Principles of Mathematics, and Introduction to Psychology. Except for the sociology class, I sat in the back of the room and prayed the teachers would not call on me. My math teacher was a tall young guy who kept his back to us as he wrote formulas on a large black chalkboard. He occasionally stopped to scratch his head or to question us about integers, equations, and probabilities. My high school math consisted of bookkeeping and an adding machine, and the only probability I knew was that the odds of flunking this class were pretty high. Four years of secretarial classes failed to prepare me for the college classroom. My education had technically stopped at the end of eight grade, and this both frightened and motivated me.

One of my first school assignments was a sociology project on urban development. I thought it was curious that most of the Home Savings Banks' foreclosures were in the Boston districts of Mattapan, Dorchester, and Roxbury. Home Savings Bank was part of the Boston Bank Urban Renewal Group (BBURG), a group of bankers that agreed to lending practices that only allowed black families to buy homes in existing black neighborhoods, or in the predominantly white and Jewish

sections of Mattapan and North Dorchester. White people were granted loans to buy homes in more prosperous and desirable sections of Boston. This practice was called red-lining and that between 1968-1972, these neighborhoods turned from 90% white to 90% black. Black families were enticed to buy homes they couldn't afford, in neighborhoods that were decaying, and in a job market that discriminated against them. Years later, suits would be filed by public advocates who exposed the unfair practice of red-lining to the public, and changes would be made in lending practices.

But during that time, I only knew it was unfair, and felt ashamed to work for an institution that caused, intentionally or not, such hardship. I wasn't sure of my next step, but I decided to look for a new job.

On one of my fifteen-minutes breaks, I read a flier taped to the inside of the women's bathroom stall. The flier, which was mimeographed in blue ink, read: *9 to 5, Organization for Women Office Workers.* It invited office workers to a meeting about changing their work lives. I had a boring, dead-end job with dull men as my bosses and was open to changing something in my life. Without nothing to lose, I attended the meeting that night, conveniently held in our building, the YWCA.

Karen Nussbaum, one of the founders of *9 to 5*, talked about how women earned only sixty cents for every dollar earned by men. We were at the bottom of the wage scale. Women shared stories about how male co-workers got away with making crude jokes and passes at them. What really struck me was learning how office workers, people just like me, were overlooked for promotions. Not that I had any interest in foreclosing properties, but I was beginning to believe the guys who worked at the bank weren't smarter or more talented than our secretarial pool.

I joined *9 to 5* and finally felt a part of something that was important, a movement that was bigger than me. I helped recruit office workers from banks, insurance companies, and universities and asked them to promote the *Bill of Rights for Women Office Workers* for the 250,000 office workers in Boston. The more that I learned about the rights of workers, the prouder I felt about my aunt, Zi Zi Maria, who had the guts to bring in the union for the fish cutters, like her, and the packers, like me. Workers who didn't have any rights at that herring plant. Our *Bill of Rights* seemed so reasonable that I couldn't understand why some office workers turned away. We were simply asking for respect, written job descriptions, compensation for overtime, equal pay to men in similar jobs, and the right to refuse to serve coffee. There were times that the last right caused the most fuss among male bosses.

In less than six months, *9 to 5* recruited hundreds of office workers to our cause and attracted the attention of the press. At one of our meetings, Karen asked me to stay and meet with other lead organizers.

"Would you be willing to be interviewed for a documentary?" She asked after our meeting.

"What would I talk about?" I asked. "I've never been filmed for anything."

"Just tell your story," she assured me, "you're living it."

I agreed as I didn't know how to refuse a request from Karen.

For the interview, I wore a blue dress and sat grasping my hands tightly in front of a large camera. The office of *9 to 5* was flooded with bright lights, and I was flooded with fear. I felt hot and thirsty, and when they asked me my name, I wanted to run out. Karen, who stood next to the interviewer, smiled and nodded at me. Most

of the session was a blur; however, I remember talking excitedly about what we would change for women office workers across the country. When the documentary aired on our local television channel, I closed my eyes during most of my interview, too frightened to look at myself. When it was over, I received two calls.

"*Brava*," Gramma congratulated me even though she didn't understand one word of English. "*Tuoi occhi brillavano.*" She liked that my blue eyes shined brilliantly.

The second call was from a cousin, "You sounded like one of those women libbers."

"Thanks," I said, knowing it was not a compliment.

My mother never called or mentioned the film, but that didn't surprise me. If she did see it, she would say that I'm never satisfied.

She was right. I was restless and always wanted more and this desire both hurt and served me. In just six months, I had gone from a dead-end life in Gloucester where drugs were my only escape to a world where everything seemed like a possibility. There was a frenzy to my pace, but I needed to make up for lost time.

All of the organizers were invited to a special showing of the documentary at which Karen announced that our film would be used as the background for a new movie starring Jane Fonda, Lila Tomlin, and Dolly Parton. Karen and Jane Fonda, it turns out, were close friends and fellow activists during the Vietnam War. The movie, *Nine to Five,* became a big hit with a follow-up television series. I didn't think the movie or the series captured the emotional state of office workers. They were

comedies, and I never saw much humor in the workplace. But it did bring attention to gender inequality and discrimination.

At school, I took lots of notes, bought the Merriam-Webster dictionary, and studied late into the night and on the weekends. I had little social time compared to my roommates who had dates ever night of the week. By the end of summer, I had completed my first term at Boston State College and gained the confidence to enroll in a second semester. School was my new obsession.

Drugs became less important in my life. I was on my own now and needed to keep a job, pay the rent, and cover all my other expenses. Most of all, I needed to prove to myself that I was "college material" and would get a degree someday. It helped that my roommates mostly drank beer and wine; pot was a big deal to them. My trajectory was different. I started off with speed and used pot as a filler. Drugs didn't fully disappear from my life, but I didn't need them to escape from life. I finally wanted to feel my life.

It was Saturday in late August when I heard a knock on our door, unusual in the middle of the day. I opened the door slowly.

"Hi, my name is Peter Hoffman. I'm your neighbor."

I stared at this half-man, half-boy with my door half-open. He was tall with broad shoulders, and his curly hair fell in so many directions. He wore a light blue t-shirt that was too tight across his shoulders, khaki shorts that fell below his narrow waist, and white socks sagging over his sneakers. He looked like a nerd.

"Do you know where Harvard Square is?" he asked, with a broad smile. He shoved a map of Cambridge into my hands. I wasn't good at reading maps but he didn't wait for an answer. "Want to come with me?"

It was a hot afternoon and I had no plans for the day.

"Sure," I said and just like that, I entered my new life.

We drove to Harvard Square and shopped for a waterbed, that Peter insisted I try out with him. I was self-conscious but didn't want him to see that in me. I sat on the edge of this moving mattress with my back toward him in the furniture store. I felt his hand on my arm as he gently pulled me toward him. The salespeople watched us as we rocked with the gentle motion of the waves. He bought the bed, a stereo, pictures, lamps, and plants for his apartment that was directly across the hall from mine. Two weeks later, I moved in.

Peter and I shared the two-bedroom apartment with his brother Gary, a post-doctoral student researching genetics at MIT. I couldn't grasp how one attains a PhD before the age of twenty-two. Peter was nineteen and studying Mechanical Engineering at MIT. They found it strange that I worked as a secretary during the day and went to school in the evenings. I found it even stranger that they had parents who paid for their education, housing, travel, and gave them credit cards to cover any expenses.

Peter was consumed with me. I was different from anyone in his world and that excited him. I let him consume me as we explored each other's bodies in a heated dance that neither of us wanted to break away from. Peter was also driven to explore New England, a region different from his home in Wisconsin. He bought me my first

hiking boots, a frame backpack, and gators for winter hiking. We spent weekends hiking and sleeping in tents. I bought a new Canon camera to record my new life, and a yellow Motobecane 10-speed bike with a racer's seat. I couldn't believe my new world, one I had to keep hidden from my parents. Mom barely talked to me and would flip out if she knew I was living with a guy. She would consider me "living in sin," a mortal sin in the Catholic Church, and a ruined woman in our family.

Peter and I attended symphonies that pierced my heart, and plays that I struggled to understand. One night, we dressed in formal clothes and dined at Locke-Ober, an exclusive oak-paneled restaurant that catered to the wealthy Blue Bloods of Boston. Just two years earlier, the restaurant served only male patrons. We sat in a formal dining room with a linen-covered table set with two forks on the left, two knives and two spoons on the right, and a small spoon and fork above the plate. For the first course, I ordered French onion soup and Peter waited for me to begin eating.

"You're not using the soup spoon." He pointed to the rounded spoon.

I switched spoons and started to eat again.

"Don't you know that you dip your spoon into the soup facing away from you not toward you?" My hands shock slightly, and I felt the heat of embarrassment on my face. I didn't tell him that we never had designated soup spoons in our house. My family just used a big spoon, dipped it in, put their heads down, and slurped as much hot liquid into their mouths as possible. We didn't set fancy tables or use candlelight as my family liked to see their food. Peter did not know very much about my family.

A waiter, in a black tuxedo, stared at me and I dreaded the next course. I usually remember good restaurant meals, but not that night. I lied about feeling sick,

we left our meals uneaten, and went home. I never returned to Lock-Ober. After that night, I resolved to never be embarrassed in a restaurant again. I bought a used copy of *The New Emily Post's Etiquette*: *The most reliable and up-to-date authority for the social customs of the 1970s* and studied table settings and read instructions for proper dining. This book has a place on my bookshelves today.

I often felt that I was acting someone's else life. There were times that I believed this was my authentic self, other times I retreated in self-doubt. The self-doubt has never left me.

My leaving the apartment caused friction with my roommates; they worried about the rent. I convinced my friend Frankie to leave Gloucester and move to Somerville. I assured my roommates that she would be a good fit. Within a week, Frankie moved in with a pile of clothes, boxes of pans, and too many kitchen utensils. She took an inventory of the sparse, white kitchen. The refrigerator had six cans of beer and a quart of milk, the cupboards had a few cans of Campbell's tomato soup, and an open box of crackers.

"Don't you girls eat?" she asked, opening and closing cabinet doors.

Susan and Debbie glanced at me with narrow eyes. I started to doubt if this new roommate plan would work out. I pulled Frankie aside and gave her a public transportation map, along with the classified section of *The Boston Globe.*

"Frankie, just cool it." I whispered. "Focus on getting a job."

"Maria, don't worry about me." She rolled her eyes. "I'll figure it out."

The next morning, I checked in with Frankie. She was wearing a short skirt, black boots, gold-looped earrings, and a red bandana on her head. I thought she

looked like a gypsy. She had circled some jobs in the classifieds and told me she planned to apply in person.

That night, an empty bus with blinking caution lights was parked on the corner of our building. Inside the apartment, I heard loud voices and music blaring.

I knocked loudly for someone to let me in. Frankie flung open the door.

"Hey, come in and meet my new friends," Frankie said as she pulled me inside.

The apartment was filled with a hazy fog of marijuana and cigarette smoke. In the corner was a tall black man wearing a white shirt embossed with the blue letters, 'MBTA." He got up to shake my hand.

"Nice to meet ya, sweetheart," he said, shaking my hand. You know what I say, "Money talks, bullshit walks."

Frankie laughed. Susan sat with her arms crossed on the living room chair. I wanted to run but Frankie was in her element. She'd landed a job as a dental assistant in Harvard Square, and free transportation from the MBTA. There were a dozen roses in the room, courtesy of the dentist boss who asked her for a date. She celebrated her victory with a fat joint and was cooking a huge pot of pasta with lentil beans. I invited Peter and Gary to the celebration and Frankie held court reciting the virtues of the Italian kitchen, the importance of pasta, and advice on how to not take any shit from anyone.

"I've never met anyone like her before," Gary said with a stunned look on his face.

"Where did she come from?"

"Gloucester," I said and shrugged, not knowing what else to say. It seemed like a bigger question than where you are from; but I never asked him about that. Frankie was like the rest of my friends— townie girls from Gloucester who pretended not to give a shit; but we were just confused young girls trying to find our way without any help from our parents, or for that matter anyone.

Limbo

It's no use.
There is no place we can meet.
You have left Gloucester.

Charles Olson

Peter and I had been together for six months, and he was pressuring me to meet my family. Mom was still furious that I had moved out of the house. Dad, now the captain of a larger fishing dragger, was out at sea for trips that lasted seven to ten days. Mom had to manage the household, the bills, the errands, the meals, and my brother without me. This was abandonment to her, and my mother has never forgiven me for Gloucester.

"Mom, I pleaded, I want you to meet my boyfriend."

"E' mericano?" she asked with sarcasm.

"Mom, we're in America," I said, with my own version of sarcasm.

My mother, like a slowly melting glacier, relented and agreed to have us visit.

We rode the train from North Station. Its stifling heat and swaying motion lulled us to the meeting place between waking and sleeping, the intersection of consciousness and the unconscious, where one can still dream. I held the heat of our night together.

This dream state dissipated as the train screeched to an abrupt halt. I jolted upright and searched through the grime of the gray, streaked windows for a platform or a white rectangular sign that would announce our destination. My eyes strained for a clue. The conductor swaggered down the aisle, rocking slightly right to left while

his flashlight, whistle and ticket puncher swayed in the opposite rhythm. His voice boomed, "Gloucesta, Gloucesta Station."

Peter lifted his head from my lap into that warm spot above my shoulder. I pressed him closer and felt his body heat. "We are here," I whispered. I steeled myself for the coldness that would emanate from my mother.

I felt anxious, on the edge again, feeling like an outsider. I lived in limbo while he lived confidently, ensconced in a secure place in this world. We exited the train. Peter swung his arm tightly around me and we walked a connected dance that I didn't want to end.

"Do we have far to go?" he asked, taking in this new neighborhood with streets filled with clapboard-sided houses.

"No, just down the street," I said, as we walked toward Gramma's home, a safe haven for my re-entry from my mother's banishment. I could still feel the sting of her hand and heart from our brutal battle. I'd pleaded for her blessing, for some level of acceptance, or an even smaller measure of love. I hoped today would bring a truce between us. Peter knew little about my family except that we spoke Sicilian, lived by the sea, and that my father was a fisherman. Peter was intrigued by the sea and shared his own stories of sailing in Lake Wisconsin. I have never been to a lake or set foot on a sail boat. I gave him a history lesson on the Sicilian language, told him how Mussolini banned the language, forcing teachers to use 'pure' Italian language in the classroom.

"Our language is over one hundred years old," I said. "Since it's not a written language, families pass it on through the generations."

"I can't believe there are no books in Sicilian." Peter said.

"There's not even a Bible," I added, "which is crazy for a country so Catholic."

"This is going to be so cool," Peter said. "I can't wait to know where you came from."

I paused at 'where you came from' as Peter did not know about my adoption, a story that will one day intrigue him and compel me to learn more. Instead, I gave him a rundown of my family members.

"There's Gramma and Grandpa," I started. "No worries, you'll love them, but remember they don't speak any English."

"What will I say them?" he asked.

"Just smile. It will be fine," I reassured him. "Zi Zi Maria is the aunt that I worked with in the fish plants." I warned him that she can be loud and bossy. "Uncle Tony is quiet and a bit slow to understand things." I didn't tell him that my aunt and uncles and most of my relatives, including my parents, married first cousins. My relatives are afraid of mixing blood with outsiders.

"My brother is Al, my cousins are Philly, Rosie, Grace Ann, and Melissa."

"Melissa?" Peter interrupted. "That sounds more American than the others."

"She was named for Melissa, the leading character from *Days of our Lives."*

"Days of what?" Peter asked.

"The soap opera." I then gave Peter an abbreviated version of how my aunt watched the program from her hospital bed. "The baby's birth coincided with Melissa being freed from jail."

Peter just nodded so I explained how my aunt thought it was a good omen.

"I got a frantic call from my aunt asking me how to spell, I said. But no one in the family can pronounce her name right. Everyone says, *Malezza* with an emphasis on the 'Ma.'

"What should I call your parents?" Peter asked.

"Tho and Fro is what our relatives call them," I said. "It's sort of a nickname for Antonia and Alfonso."

Peter repeated the words "Tho and Fro."

"On second thought, don't call them anything, I said. They won't notice."

Turned out, I was right.

Gramma lived in a working-class section of town where two-family homes are crowded into streets with small lawns and no trees. Saint Anne's Church loomed over our neighborhood. Gramma's house faced the right side of the church that depicted miracles on its stained glass, gabled windows. We arrived at the asphalt-shingled home, raced up two flights of stairs to join the commotion that defined my family.

Gramma heard us and rushed to meet us first. With strong arms, she engulfed me in one solid embrace and delivered loud kisses on each of my checks.

"*Sangue mio, figlia mia.*" My blood, my daughter. This was how my Gramma always called me.

This was one of her three-layer days. She wore a simple black dress protected by a pink duster with tiny metal snaps fastened from top to bottom. She protected her duster with a full-length apron that had pockets large enough to house small children

and her assortment of wooden spoons. Her hair was covered by a thin brown net. Gramma protected her body but left her heart wide-open.

"*Che sapurrito,*" Gramma said as she wrapped her arms around Peter. *Sapurrito* is the Sicilian word reserved for beautiful children originating from "*sapure*" to taste something sweet and wonderful.

Behind Gramma was the rest of the family. We got hugs from the girls and women, handshakes from the men, and nods from the boys. Zi Zi Maria, a round and more buxom version of Lucille Ball, gave her opinion to no one in particular, "*A vero beddu con il occhi verdi e' capeddi richi.*" She asked, "*Mai chi cosi fai*?"

I told Peter that my aunt said you were handsome with green eyes and curly hair, but that she wanted to know what he did. Before he could answer, my mother rose stiffly from the corner chair and made her way toward us. She nodded slightly, her thin lips in a straight line.

"*Ugni este a trovari*?" she was literally asking me where did you go to find him? Mom stood in front of us with her arms rigid by her side. Peter wanted to shake her hand, but she didn't move closer to us. She was unimpressed that I went out of my way to bring a 'mericano' home. I knew at that moment that my mother did not, and would not ever like him. I felt like a failure again.

Everyone talked at once, speaking in Sicilian, a language most people mistake for an Italian dialect. I felt conflicted about my first language, harsh and guttural but filled with passionate words to express love and anger.

Still standing and towering over my family, Peter politely answered their questions as I furiously translated from Sicilian to English. They talked about him in third-person as if Peter was not present.

"Dov'e sono e parenti?" Gramma wants to know where are his parents.

When Peter answered Madison, Wisconsin, Zi Zi chimed in.

"*Perche cosi' lontano.*" My aunt couldn't fathom why his parents let him move so far away.

"I came to study at MIT," Peter answered.

No one in my family knew about the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, a university less than forty miles from Gloucester.

"What do you study?" Uncle Tony asked.

"He studies Mechanical Engineering," I said loudly with hopes that the questions would stop, but Dad heard the word "mechanical" and entered the fray.

"Eh, I was a mechanic in the old Country," Dad said. "Ten years old and I was fixing bikes with the village Maestro. In those days it was an important job, there were no cars before the war..."

"Fro, it's not that kind of a mechanic." My mother interrupted. "He's not going get his hands dirty."

Gramma took charge and demanded we sit down at the kitchen table, positioned between two windows facing St. Anne's Church. We circled around her white enameled table with a center pattern of green leaves that matched the plastic fabric on our chairs. Gramma placed a huge platter of meatballs and sausage layered with tomato sauce at the table. On each side of the platter was a tall pile of white

paper napkins and flatware strewn across the table. Several forks were buried under thick slices of Italian bread.

Grandpa placed two jugs of Vino Fino – one red and one white—wine to be mixed with one's choice of either ginger ale or orange soda. The metal cheese grater with large chunks of parmesan laid on a dishcloth. Our table was set.

We scrambled for chairs and packed ourselves tightly around the table. Peter sat across from me and I was squeezed in between my uncle and cousin. Gramma was at the sink, the large white stock pot filled with hand-rolled pasta precariously tilted toward the colander when Peter asked, "What's that building across the street?"

"It's a church!" Uncle Tony yelled. "I thought he was smart, what's a matter, don't he know a Church?

I mumbled something lame and tried to deliver a warning kick; but Peter was seated across from me. He always asked so many questions wherever we went, and now I wanted him to shut up. His eyes locked on the portrait of the *Madonna della Lacrime*, the Virgin Mary with tears streaming down her beautiful, gentle face. I was relieved that he didn't ask about the Virgin.

"Who's that guy?" Peter asked pointing to the statue seated on top of the white, washing machine in our kitchen.

Everyone gasped and then silence. Peter didn't know St. Anthony, my Gramma's best friend, her go-to saint for lost items, courage, and peace.

"*Perche no sappe San Antonino*?" Gramma asked looking straight at me, "Why doesn't he know St. Anthony?"

"*E' Juda*," I said, he's Jewish.

I glanced at Gramma covered in sadness with eyes brimming with tears.

"*Maria, non e battiato*," she said, worried that he was not baptized.

The faucet ran, the pasta was in the pot, and I feared she would baptize him by pouring water over his head. She worried that his soul will go to limbo—a place reserved for unbaptized innocent children and adults without sin. Even with a decree from the Catholic Church eliminating the concept of limbo, my family won't concede. My family wanted entrance into heaven. They feared for any souls that were denied the presence of God and ousted into the perpetual state of limbo.

I got up and helped her fill the plates with pasta and thick red sauce. Eating now took precedence and our conversation transitioned from Peter to food.

"*Salsa con salsiccia piccante meglio*," Grandpa said, nodding to Gramma. He thought the hot sausage in our sauce today was better than last's week sauce that only had the meatballs.

"*Mi piace la salsa con la pelle de maiale.*" Uncle Tony said he liked the sauce better with a bit of pig skin.

I was relieved to have our normal dinner conversation that revolved around the food we eat, the food we ate yesterday, and the food we will eat tomorrow. Food was and is an obsession in my family. From the topic of food, the men switched to talking about boats, engines, and the latest fishing trip.

"They gave us only sixty cents a pound for our cod," Dad complained to no one in particular.

"Eh, you're never satisfied," Mom scoffed.

"*Smettila*!" my aunt yelled to her kids with hits to the side of their heads telling them to stop kicking each other under the table.

Gramma didn't sit at the table; instead, she stood by the kitchen sink and watched over us to make sure we had enough to eat. Grampa reached across the table to grab another piece of bread, my dad got up and forked two more meatballs from the platter onto his plate, cousin Philly whacked my brother on the arm for taking too long to grate his cheese. As forks came to a pause, Gramma darted in and whisked away the empty plates. She spent countless hours to make our meals, but was always anxious to reclaim her space with order, cleanliness, and clean counters. I was relieved the meal went back to normal and took the attention away from Peter and me.

The glass Pyrex coffee pot started to percolate over the low blue gas flame, a signal that our meal was coming to an end. We drank our coffees and started the rounds of good-byes. Gramma cornered Peter, communicating with a combination of hand symbols and smiles, and placed a foil-wrapped package of cookies in his hands.

Mom cornered me. "Mareeh, his family's rich, Jewish and educated. They'll never accept you, he's gonna leave you…Listen to me."

Little Al

…not at all the same grace of a man
came up on deck at sea in oilskins

Charles Olson

Mom's harsh and ominous warning left a repeating echo in my brain, a message of my failures and her disappointment in me. Before we left Gramma's house, she bent toward me and slipped in one more dagger.

"Uh, who you think you are? Rich Jews stay with their kind; they don't marry daughters of fishermen. You'll see."

Peter followed my dad to the front door talking a mile a minute.

"Alfonso, if you have time, can I see your fishing boat?" Peter asked.

Dad glanced over at Peter who wore docker pants and a collared shirt, in colors too light for working men.

"You'll get grease on those clothes," my father said, "and my boat's not fancy like those sailing boats."

Peter started to dismiss the importance of his clothes when Mom interrupted, "I'm not going on any boat. Take me home first!"

I debated for a second whether to go back to the house with her, or join them on the boat. It wasn't much of a debate. Given Mom's mood, we would end up in separate corners of the kitchen, faced off for the next round of fights. I opted for the fishing wharf. Mom sat in the back seat with me but didn't say a word for the drive home. Peter wouldn't shut up. Mom had the door open before the car made a full

stop. As she exited from the car she said, "*rallegrarsi*" a sarcastic way to say rejoice among yourselves. No one answered her.

Dad drove down Rogers Street, known for its rowdy bars frequented by men who make their living, or barely make a living, from the sea. Worn out signs beckon fishermen, lumpers, and fish cutters to escape into the House of Mitch, Joe's Dug Out, and the Crow's Nest, bars not particularly welcoming to women.

In the late 1990's, Sèbastian Junger in *The Perfect Storm* would put Gloucester on the map and the Crow's Nest would be a tourist destination for men *and* women. In 1999, they filmed the movie in Gloucester and constructed a building for the bar scenes, probably because the Crow's Nest was such a dump. When *The Perfect Storm* premiered in Gloucester, Dad had nothing good to say about the movie. He said, "Fishermen are family men and not a bunch of drunks." Dad laughed when he told me how the movie got it all wrong.

"Maria, it's a steel-hull vessel," he said shaking his head. "The crew was hammering plywood on the steel pilot house after the wave crashed through it!"

Mom liked the movie because the funeral scene was filmed at Saint Ann's Church and my two nephews served as altar boys.

Dad took a detour down Main Street and parked in front of Virgilio's Bakery.

"Need to buy a bread before they close today," Dad said as he walked toward the small bakery filled with Italian cold cuts, pastries, and loaves of bread crusted with sesame seeds.

He returned with two loaves of bread wrapped in white wax paper, stamped with the baker's logo, a fisherman at the wheel, and the tag line "the bread of the

fisherman." The smell of warm bread filled our car as we continued toward the Fort. Virgilio's bread was always at our table, and has been the bread of Sicilian immigrants for the past fifty years.

We followed a narrow, two-way street with triple-deckers, the Three Dories coffee shop, and Gorton-Pew—the mackerel plant and my first fishing-packing job.

Dad pointed to a red triple-decker next to an empty parking lot.

"When we came from the old country, we lived there," Dad said shaking his head, "and everyone used the same *bacasu."*

Peter gave me a quizzical look.

"*Bacasu* means back house," I said, "it's a shared bathroom for the tenants."

I didn't tell Peter that we were unfamiliar with the refined Italian word for bathroom, *gabinetto*, or that my family bastardizes American words adding vowels where they don't belong. Our lives had the shabbiness of a poor working class that spoke in a language that was coarse and guttural. Emotions of shame conflicted with my pride in being the daughter of such a such a gentle and hard-working man.

"Dad, you should have kept that house. We would have been millionaires with beachfront property!"

Peter rolled down the window, nodding his head as we drove by more broken-down buildings and empty lots. He was probably thinking that nothing in this neighborhood would be worth a million dollars. I was beginning to think that bringing him to the Fort was one big mistake.

"Maria, this is a working wharf. If rich people come and build fancy houses, it's still a wharf and you'll never get rid of the rats."

Five years later, I will take my parents to an upscale restaurant on Long Wharf in Boston. The red-bricked building was a converted warehouse, decorated in a nautical theme, with views of the waterfront. The menu boasted expensive entrees of blackened snapper, and pepper-crusted steaks, but Dad had hoped for fried clams. I don't remember what we ate that night, but this was our conversation.

"Maria, you take us to a wharf to eat: there's probably rats in the kitchen."

"Dad, this is a nice place, I said, 'the condos on this wharf sell for hundreds of thousands of dollars."

"Unbelievable," he said shaking his head.

We parked at Felicia's Oil Company, a small shack that served as the office for the fuel company and for the bookkeeper, Grace, who kept the 'books' for Dad and most of the local fishermen. It was October, and a large number of boats were tied up as a recent storm forced the fleet into the harbor. We headed toward the dock and the *Little Al*—nestled between the *Joseph & Lucia* and the *Sandra Jean*— her bow rising slightly above the others.

To board, we played a game of leap frog, jumped on the rails of the *Joseph & Lucia*, balanced ourselves, and then leapt onto her deck. We repeated this sequence and simultaneously landed on the *Little Al*'s deck.

Once on his boat, Dad transformed into captain. He pulled his cap a bit further down and took long strides toward the starboard side of the boat, then started telling Peter about the nuances of an Eastern Dragger.

"These doors are two-hundred pounds each!" Dad said nodding his head. "The men lower these trawl doors to set the nets."

"How long do you keep your nets out?" Peter asked.

"Eh, we trawl for three or four hours," Dad said. "Sometimes we get lucky, but other times, nothing." He gave a short whistle and continued boasting about his boat—the largest eastern dragger in the harbor. "The boat was built in Rockland and they used the local pine to build the masts." Dad pointed toward the sky.

I looked up at the tall, white-tipped orange masts and tried to visualize the size of Maine's native pine trees. I didn't know it then, but I will fall in love with Rockland, and Maine will become my home. One day Dad will reminisce about the *Little Al* and tell me how he navigated her from the rocky shores of Maine to the protected harbor of Gloucester.

"Her name was *Wawenock*," Dad said, "but we didn't know what it meant so we christened her the *Little Al*, after my son."

Peter and Dad went to the pilot house and I stayed on deck to soak in the last warm rays of autumn. I didn't need to follow them. From the deck, I could see the statue of Our Lady of Good Voyage looking down protectively at this motley fleet of draggers; each one painted in primary colors that boasted the names of saints, wives, and often the name of the captain's daughter.

My mother refused to have her name on a boat. She was terrified of the sea, hated my father's absences, and hated, even more, being a fisherman's wife. She often said, "it's too hard being both father and mother to you." She will speak about his absences and her feelings of being abandoned for the rest of her life.

Dad named our first fishing boat for my older cousin Nancy and me. He painted *Nancy & Maria*, in bold red letters on the boat's white hull. Our 35-foot dragger navigated the open ocean boasting the colors of the Italian flag, until she sank to the bottom of the sea. The drug store on Main Street sold faded postcards of the *Nancy & Maria*, but I never purchased one. Now, I canvass thrift shops in Gloucester hoping to find the post card of the boat that was named for me.

Like the names they boasted, Gloucester's wooden draggers behaved differently at sea. Crashing waves flooded the Draggers' low-sided decks. In winter, the waves turned instantly into thick sheaths of ice, masking the deck, pilot house, and gear. Dad said the *Little Al*, high-bowed and high-sided, would be seaworthy in a storm. I hoped he was right, since we were still reeling from the recent sinking of his last boat. Dad hadn't received a settlement from the insurance company, and I couldn't figure out how he could afford this investment, let alone cover the cost of engine repairs, fishing equipment, and the salaries of a ten-man crew.

While Dad and Peter explored the pilot house, I went down to the fo'c'stle. As a child, Dad taught me to descend the narrow, wooded ladder one rung at a time, with a steady hand on the side rails. The smell of kerosene and the earthy scent of pine greeted me as I navigated to the belly of our ship. I settled into one of the bottom

bunks: a red, plaid blanket covered its thin mattress and a picture of Saint Peter was taped to the back wall.

I thought of Peter and how his body would not fit in this small space. If we laid together, he would be curled over me in a fetal position, his body my protection. The galley had twelve white coffee cups lined up for mug-up—mid-day coffee breaks if the men were not hauling nets. On top of the gas oven stove was a greasy cast iron frying pan and an aluminum coffee pot. Uncle Benny, my mother's older brother, offered to be cook for an extra twenty-five dollars a trip. Dad said he cooked the same meal for each day of the week and 'You only get fish on Fridays.' The crew hated his meals, but my uncle didn't care.

I had begged Dad for years to take me on a trip; but he said a woman brought bad luck. He often said, "I wish you had been a boy." Sometimes, I felt the same way. Life as a boy would have been easier in Gloucester; maybe I wouldn't have left.

I was imaging what it would be like to cook on this boat when I heard my name bellowed out. "Maaaaareeeeahh!" I left the belly of the boat and scrambled up to the main deck.

"*Maria, aiutatmi*!" Dad yelled for help as he couldn't understand all the questions coming from Peter. Dad had not heard this much English in his life. His crew, friends, and everyone in our family spoke Sicilian.

I stood between them and alternated between two languages hoping to satisfy Peter's curiosity. Dad kept interrupting with, '*diglielo*'—tell him, when he thought my explanations were too brief.

"Peter, these doors are hauled back, and nets emptied so the catch can be sorted by deck hands."

"Are all the guys on deck to pull the nets?" Peter asked.

"Yep, everyone except for Uncle Tony. He's down in the hold."

"Maria, you mean that little guy I met at lunch today works in this dungeon?" Peter said as he peered down the fish hold.

"Yup, he does," I said. "it's fine."

"It's twenty feet down!"

"He's the 'hold man,' and it's the best place for him," I assured him.

"How do they get the fish down to him?"

"They throw it down through the deck plates. On big loads someone helps him shovel the fish into the ice bins."

Dad joined our conversation adding that his brother Tony was afraid of the water and couldn't swim. Peter's mouth dropped open in an expression of stunned silence.

"Don't matter if you swim, you fall overboard the water temperature will kill ya," Dad said.

My dad fished in open seas more than a hundred miles off-shore and I had just realized that the ability to swim wouldn't help anyone in those waters. A cold wind whipped through me as we returned to the pilot-house. The last rays of the afternoon sun cast a warm glow inside this wheelhouse, the brass helm sparkled in the light. Tacked to the pine-paneled wall were prayer cards of the Virgin Mary, Saint Peter— the patron saint of fishermen— and a photo of Dad and me. This was Dad's home, the

captain at the helm, navigating his ship with the help of radar, a band radio, and his new LORAN (Long Range Aid to Navigation).

Peter was fascinated with this equipment and Dad knew it.

"Not like the old days," Dad chuckled. "Now, we got a fathometer and sonar to help us find fish."

"Could I go on a fishing trip with you?" Peter asked. "I could be a deck hand and work for free."

"This is rough work," Dad said, gently trying to dissuade him.

Before the year was over, Peter would convince Dad to let him join the crew for a ten-day fishing trip on the *Little Al*. But today, my father didn't seem to understand why a young man in college wanted to experience life on a fishing dragger.

Our last stop was the engine room, directly below the pilot house, which contained the main engine, generators, batteries, air compressor, and a fuel tank that stored up to ten thousand gallons of fuel. At its entrance was a single, water-tight door that sealed off the engine room from the rest of ship. Dad pointed at the door, "In a storm, you got to keep this door closed or it will be all over."

Please Come Save Us

In Gloucester-town
you publish it, where men
have cause to know where god is
when wooden ships or steel ships,
with sail or power,
are out on men's business

on water which are, Ferrini
are not gods
on waves (and waves
are not the same as deep water)

Charles Olson

January 12, 1976, the 115-foot eastern-rig side trawler was ground fishing eighty-three miles southeast of Gloucester. It was a sea of darkness. Without the grace of warning, the weather turned fierce and a Nor'easter unleashed her fury on the *Little Al* and its seven-man crew. Thick sea smoke rose from the ocean's surface. Hurricane-force winds and heavy snow thundered down on my father, captain of the *Little Al*, and his men.

At 3:30 a.m., the weather band confirmed Dad's fear when it issued a high sea alert with strong gale winds. Too far from shore to change course, Dad's only option was to ride out the storm—an angry sea filled with mountains of water coming from every direction. There was no turning back. At the helm, Dad jogged his trawler, its bow rising up the face of each wave and plummeting down the backside. With each wave, he heard the shudder of the boat's wooden hull. The *Little Al* slogged, under the speed of five knots, directly into a seemingly endless wall of twenty to

thirty-foot waves. The waves crashed over the bow and transformed the deck and masts into ice sculptures. His strong hands gripped the wheel with all his force, his legs like solid masts held firmly to the deck. He thought of his men and prayed the seas would calm. It was critical to keep the ship from turning broadside into the seas; a risk heightened by the weight of 80,000 pounds of fish in its hold. The winds increased and visibility worsened. He radioed a distress call to the Coast Guard and the station master returned the message: Storm conditions unsafe for a Coast Guard rescue.

***

I felt unhinged. On January 12th, at 4:00 a.m., a howling sound rattled the windows of my bedroom. I bolted upright, turned on the light, and took an inventory of my room hoping the familiar surroundings would calm the turbulence in me. A gray and rusty radiator hissed a burst of steam, thin madras curtains moved with the rhythm of the wind. I shivered, from cold or fear or both, and pulled the blanket over my chest. Abandonment washed over me.

Three years ago, Peter saved me. Several months ago, Peter left me. Religion and class defined and separated us. He boasted that his family belonged to Reformed Judaism, a liberal and intellectual denomination that embraced diversity without rejecting those who doubt. I learned that the mother held the power to define the Jewish being. I considered converting to Judaism, but feared the pain of betrayal this would unleash on my parents. Named for the Virgin Mary, perhaps, I was branded for

life. I never had to make the choice; Peter's parents made it for me. They threatened their son with a "shunning," a form of burial if he dared to marry the daughter of a Sicilian fisherman, a working-class girl who wore a gold cross. I never learned what descriptive they hated most. In the end, it didn't matter.

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At 5:15 a.m. the ship's alarm—sensitive to heat and higher than normal water level in the bilge—blasted a warning. Dad called out for a deckhand to man the helm. He smelled smoke and rushed out of the pilothouse, in stocking feet, and down into the engine room. The watertight door that sealed the engine room and ten thousand gallons of fuel was wide open. The engineer had made a fatal mistake. A treacherous triangle of fuel, heat, and oxygen ignited a fire and within seconds the engine room was engulfed with black smoke. Dad desperately tried to put out the flames with a small fire extinguisher; it was too late. On deck, the men were securing gear when a rogue wave crashed through the glass of the pilot house and destroyed the ship's navigational equipment. It was time to abandon ship.

Dad ordered his men to unlatch the life raft from the pilothouse roof. Two of the younger men climbed to the top of the pilothouse and unleashed their one hope for survival. Their bodies swayed with the turbulence of the sea. With hands, numbed by the freezing temperature, they brought the raft on deck. The crew tried to decipher the instructions for inflating the raft. They could not read English and precious time

was lost. Smoke rose from the pilot house. They finally inflated the life raft, tied it down, along with a ladder, to the forward gallows frame.

"It will be safe up forward," Dad reassured his men. "It will take long time for the *Little Al* to sink."

Dad made a distress call to the *Sandra Jane,* seconds before they lost electricity.

"Please come save us: the boat's on fire."

***

6:30 a.m. I can't sleep. I was dismissed me for being less, and I have exhausted myself trying to be more. If I didn't leave space to feel and to think; maybe I would survive. Tonight, my plan wasn't working. Loneliness washed over me and I reached for the phone.

"Peter, I just need to talk to someone," I pleaded. "Can't we just see each other and be friends." I was ashamed of my desperation to have him in my life.

"I can't help you," he said. "You know that we can't just be friends."

The line between us broken.

The wind continued to howl, and waves of panic engulfed me. Something was wrong, and it wasn't about me this time. Again, I reached for the phone and dialed home.

"Mom, where's Dad?"

"Maria, who told you?" she asked. Her voice sounded angry in the way she once spoke when she didn't want the truth to find me.

"Told me what?" I asked holding my breath.

"Why you calling me?" Mom asked. "Who told you!"

"No one called, I woke up with fear; I felt something was wrong. Mom, where's Dad!"

"The marine operator called and they're in a storm. She paused for what seemed hours. The Coast Guard can't rescue them because it's too rough. It's in God's hands now."

I hung up the phone, disconnecting with my mother and reconnecting with a sea of turbulent emotions. Fear was most dominant. I prayed that the *Little Al* would be seaworthy, and that God will have mercy on them. I wanted to tell Peter that the man he respected and the boat he loved was in danger. I wanted to tell him again that I was in danger too. Instead, I boarded the trolley that staggered toward North Station and to the train that will take me back home.

***

Within seconds of the distress call, co-captain Sam Militello of the *Sandra Jane* took a radar fix on the *Little Al's* position. Its six-man crew hauled back their nets and doors and threw the gear on deck. They opened the engine up and pushed the boat full speed into high winds and rough seas.

"Never in all my years as a skipper," Militello later told reporters, "have a pushed a boat and engine the way I did then." Although the *Sandra Jane* was two

miles away, they could see the flames in the darkness shrouded by sea smoke and heavy snow.

The boat used no compass, she was guided only by fire. In fifteen minutes, the *Sandra Jane* arrived and positioned herself as close as possible to the burning ship. The pilothouse was engulfed in flames. The high waves tossed the *Little Al* back and forth as if she had no weight. In this turbulence, the crew somehow managed to throw a lifeline across to the men of the *Little Al.* The rescue effort was compromised when part of the rubber life raft deflated, likely punctured by the abrasion of the wooden ship against rubber. The life raft that should have brought ten men safety only accommodated four. With two boats rolling in the high seas, the men had to find a solution fast. They formed a two-way system where each crew held a line tied to the raft and pulled it back and forth. This rescue method got the first four men off the *Little Al* and aboard the *Sandra Jane.*

More trouble struck when waves pushed the raft too close to the burning ship. Dad and his two remaining men tied the hauling line to a cleat so that they could climb down the ladder and get into the raft. As the *Little Al* violently dipped and rose, the raft strap to which the line was tied ripped off. Dad made the call for the men to leap into the raft, but panic overtook one man, he wouldn't jump. The *Sandra Jean* had to get closer to the *Little Al*, careful not to damage its own hull. A line was thrown and they rescued the stranded man. The crew, covered with black smoke, coughed black soot from their lungs. Cold and shivering, they huddled on deck and watched as the *Little Al* disappeared into the bottom of the sea.

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Gloucester was cloaked in gray. Gusting winds whipped through me. I braced against the cold and walked the several miles from the train station to our home. Mom opened the door; her face was drained of color, her thin lips pursed in a tight grimace. She wore the look of a fisherman's wife, resigned and helpless. She reassured me that Dad was out there with his best friend Sammy, Co-Captain of the *Sandra Jean.*

"At least, they're together," she said. This was not our first storm.

The phone rang, breaking the silence between us. Sammy's wife, Ann Grace, brought news of relief, "the men are safe and on their way home."

We were spared from the unspeakable. In the kitchen, we sat, two women trapped in the fear of uncertainty.

"I don't know what we're going to do now," my mother said as she got up to make more coffee. Mom looked paler, and her shoulders drooped. The kitchen was stifling hot, but my mom wore a purple robe over her pants and sweater. It looked like she hadn't slept all night.

"Hopefully, the damage won't cost too much," I said, knowing it probably would. All repairs on large draggers are expensive. I hoped Dad wasn't facing engine repairs. He purchased this vessel twenty-eight months ago.

"Your father had no business buying a bigger boat after the last one sunk."

"He's doing it to give you a better life," I said. "Try to support him."

"*Vero,*" she said dismissing any truth to what I said.

"Mom," I asked, "Why didn't you believe me when I said no one had called me about Dad?"

"How did you know?"

"I just felt that something was going wrong with Dad."

"I don't believe in those things," She said and dismissed me.

I had sensed my father's danger, turbulent waves of fear crashed with mine.

I needed a distraction; I started to prepare dinner while Mom made calls to update family members on the rescue of the crew. We were both steeped in worry; some we shared, and others we kept silent.

We sat again at the kitchen table. Mom remained quiet and I exposed the pain of rejection.

"Oh Mom, I'm so exhausted. I don't know if I can keep doing anymore."

"It was you who wanted to go to college, and now you live like a *poverina*."

She said I lived like a poor one. I was immersed at Boston College; a secretary by day, a full-time student at night, with a union drive that consumed my emptiness. I had hopes that a union would give raises to office workers at Boston College. I had hopes that this drive would give self-worth to me.

"I'm not living like a poor one," I said. "I'm just living too alone."

"I told you he would leave you, but you didn't listen."

"Mom, just stop," I pleaded.

"*Ti stai distruggendo per un solo uomo.*"

I was destroying myself over just one man. She kept repeating "*per un solo uomo*"—for just one man. She was right, I was destroying myself by not letting go of

this one man in the world. His abandonment had driven me into darkness, and I couldn't find my way into the light.

The afternoon moved into evening before I heard Dad's footsteps on the back stairs. I rushed to the door to hug him, but halted at the sight of his ashen face and vacant eyes. His clothes were damp and covered with soot.

"Dad, where's the boat?" I asked in a trembling voice.

He placed a manila envelope, a folded American flag, and the photo of him and me that had hung in the pilot house on our kitchen table.

"Maria, that's all that's left of the *Little Al*."

You Found Her

It is undone business
I speak of, this morning
with the sea
stretching out
from my feet

Charles Olson

I quit my day job as a social worker in East Boston, a decision I will regret. I also leave my night job as a bartender in Boston's combat zone, a decision I won't regret. I sell my furniture and pack the remainder of my belongings in two boxes. In my pocket I have a one-way ticket to Paris on Braniff, a new airline with large orange planes that offer the lowest fares to Europe. I have $1,000 in traveler's checks. I'm 23 years old and want to escape the loneliness of Boston; I feel loveless and lost. I return to Gloucester to say good-bye.

"MaREEah!"

This is not the Maria reserved for the Virgin Mary, mother of God, nor the melodic and romantic Maria of opera and theater. When my mother yells my name, I hear an agonized "Ma," a word reserved for resignation in our Sicilian dialect; "ree," her high-pitched plea for my attention, and "ah," the exhalation of her pain.

She calls my name again; I ignore her. I focus on packing my backpack

Passport, wallet, maps, jewelry, and toiletries are strewn across the dining table and I am deciding what I will take, and what I will leave behind.

My mother's in the kitchen, standing in the right corner, firmly positioned at the sink. She moves to an angry uninterrupted rhythm as she scrubs, rinses, and bangs

each dish to its upright position. We are contained in this small space, lines already drawn in this familiar boxing ring.

"Look at ya, never satisfied," she yells, though we are less than thirty feet apart. My mother is in prime form, but I am too tired to fight.

"You're a fisherman's daughter, you know!" She punches a fist into the air. "You went to college, and what good did it do you?"

I don't respond, but hear the truth in her accusation.

"You now quit a good job, and for what?" She doesn't stop for me to answer. "You always think you're better than us."

"Really!" With this one word, I enter the ring. With the force of my palms, I push back from the table, and in seconds I am at the kitchen sink. We are now face-to-face, and I scream, "I don't think I'm better than anyone."

Not one to back off, she continues, "Ah, you're never satisfied." Her thin lips form a wry smile as she nods at me.

"Yeah, right!" I say, believing she is wrong.

"Oh, Madre Mia," she sighs. "You now going away by yourself and for what."

My mom turns her back and reverts to a hunched-back position over the kitchen sink. "Mom, I just need to make this choice," I say, re-entering the match.

"Oh ya, and what good came from your choices!"

This is not a question and with this one line, she wins.

I am down for the count with no energy left. A list of failures closes in on me: *Daughter's rich, Jewish boyfriend dumps her. Daughter fucks up her social work job. Daughter's union campaign fails at Boston College. Daughter can't find love.* I can't

tell my mother that I feel fragile and lost; and that this trip is my only hope to find strength.

I go back to packing the possessions that I will take with me. I'll store the remainder of my belongings in boxes in my bedroom. It is a daunting task as I don't know where I am going; nor, do I know how long I will be gone.

"MaREEah!" she yells again, repeating the last "ah."

She sits down, not next to me, but behind me in the chair propped under the white wall phone with its long, overstretched coiled cable and prayer cards of various saints tucked off the side.

"Maria, I know you!" I anticipate another accusation of failure, but she continues in a quieter voice. "You always been too curious, you want to know everything," she says, "*Dimme l'verita.*" She asks for the truth.

"Did you find her?"

"Mom, found who?" I ask with exasperation.

"Your mother, your real mother!"

We are returning to our familiar crazy-making time. I pause on "real" and what real is and isn't, and whether she would laugh if I asked her, "Mom, are you my 'fake' mother?" I don't ask, and she doesn't stop.

She pleads again, "*dimmi ora, dimmi l'verita*" Tell me now, tell me the truth!

It's late at night. Mom looks so small in her pink fleece robe and pajama pants that trail to the floor. I sense her vulnerability, but I don't want to be near her. I leave the room and carry my boxes upstairs to what used to be my bedroom. The framed photo of the *Madonna delle Lacrime*, the Mother of Tears, with two teardrops

streaming down her beautiful face, is still in my room. Against the main wall a steamer trunk still holds a collection of hand-embroidered tablecloths, sheets, lace doilies, and imported Italian linens for my wedding trousseau.

This is her "hope chest" for me. I've crushed her hopes. I will marry twice and my trousseau will not be gifted to me. In the future when my mother enters a nursing home, fragile, and no longer able to see, I will open this steamer trunk and be touched by the exquisite embroidery she sewed for me. I will wrap each item in protective paper and take the contents of this hope chest to my home. I will bestow these heirlooms and hopes to my children and friends.

I return downstairs with hopes she will leave me alone, but she is relentless.

"Just tell me, and I won't be mad."

There is an urgency in her voice. *Is she afraid that I won't return? Why does she want me to find this woman? Is it for her or me?*

"I don't need to find her. Mom, you're enough for me."

The way I said *enough* made us laugh. We look at each other knowing that were too much for each other, and yet not enough.

Her voice softens, "Maria, I slept in her bed, and I think God put me there."

She points to the chair and says, "*Assittarti.*"

I sit down and move the chair closer to her. She's unusually calm as she unfolds her story.

"Maria, right after I got married, the doctor sent me to the hospital, and they took everything out. Your father didn't say nothing either. We were stupid then."

My heart feels pierced. *Why didn't her doctor take the time to explain the tumors and the need for surgery? Maybe, the hysterectomy wasn't necessary?*

"It was a neighbor, who didn't mind her own business, who told me the truth," Mom tells me. "She tried to make me feel better by saying, 'I was young and could adopt.'

My mother was not consoled, and her inability to have children deepened her depression, but this is not the story my mother intends to share tonight.

"Maria, when I got sick again and was in the hospital, I prayed all the time to the Blessed Mother to give me a baby girl."

"Mom, it wasn't the Blessed Mother. Someone helped you apply to Catholic Charities when you and Dad finally figured out that a hysterectomy meant you couldn't have children!"

"I wouldn't have married if I knew then that I couldn't have children."

"So, what would you have done?"

"I would have become a nun," she says with such regret.

"So why did you adopt me?" I ask with frustration.

"Maria, I wanted company. Someone to take care of me when I get old."

I am silent.

"I didn't care about nothing anymore," She says, not looking at me.

"A friend came to the hospital and told me about the French woman down the hall from me. She fell in love with a sailor from Greece and had a baby. She was so crazy about the man she would jump out the window at night to meet him. She kept a picture of the man by her bed. Maria, she was a wild one!"

"The French woman had blue eyes and four other children." My mother spoke in rapid-fire, fearful that I might leave before her story is told. The words 'four other children' pierced my heart. I could not search for a woman who kept four children and gave away one.

"Maria, after the woman leaves the hospital, they move me into her room. The next day, a social worker said, 'We have a baby girl for you.' God put me in that bed to take her place."

This was how I learned the full story of my adoption. The night before I left for Paris and my mother never asks me why I am leaving; perhaps, she knows I didn't know when I would return. I had no map for my journey.

"Maria, it's okay if you found her because I want to meet her," Mom says again.

"Mom, I never looked for her, I never found her," I say again, thinking that she is disappointed. I didn't know then that my mother needed to find someone who could help her understand me. Perhaps, this other mother could illuminate who I was and why I was so different from my family. I believe this would have brought comfort to my mom.

I wanted to tell my mother that I was not leaving her, just trying to find myself.

Santa Lucia

In the twilight snow for less than a minute
Less that the time I proposed to write
That the green of the whiting dragger the Santa Lucia
Was, two minutes ago, as worn & exact as the color
Of that Saint's eyes as they lie as, three minutes ago
The color of the leaden sky too was the pewter of the plate she
Holds her out on in Zurbubran's painting of her act of
Life & its proposed loss

Charles Olson

In the twilight hour, the time between prayers and meals, my grandmother stood at her kitchen window facing the ocean that reflected the day's diffused and waning light. She searched for fishing draggers returning from sea and knew each name by the color of the hull and the rise of the bow. Draggers—painted in primary colors of forgotten flags—christened with names honoring saints, mothers, and wives. Our fleet gave tribute to both the living and the dead. My grandmother, the matriarch of the harbor, notified wives and mothers when their vessels appeared in the distant horizon. She knew the dark green hull of the *Santa Lucia*, named for the aristocratic martyr known as the bearer of light for those who believed in her miracles. The fishermen prayed that her eyes, seeped in the color of dark moss, would radiate a beacon light and protect them from the perils at sea.

Prayers and faith were not enough to save the *Santa Lucia*. The saint failed to protect the dragger that wore her name—a forty-foot vessel built in the shipyard of Gloucester, launched on her shores, and lost in the deep waters of Maine. I am conflicted about this saint and her betrayal of the ship that wore her name, and of the

captain who succumbed to a devotion so blind and senseless. I am bereft that another one of our eastern-draggers, testing its strength and courage, disappeared in waters so far from home.

And like the captain of these ships, my grandmother also prayed to a small number of patron saints that reigned in her home: Saint Joseph petitioned for good health, or if this failed a plea for a peaceful death; Saint Peter—the fisherman and the favored disciple of Jesus—summoned to protect our fishermen from drownings at sea; Saint Anthony, her constant companion—the one she hoped would bless her with strength, was called upon to find lost objects. She prayed to Santa Lucia, above all others, to shelter me from dangerous men.

As a child of five, I watched her fingers dance across the silver beads. Prayers sung in a low whisper with her canto *Ave Maria, Madre di Dio* recited at each bead. She closed the song of her rosary with three kisses on the silver crucifix as she chanted, *Santo Dio, Santo Dio Santo Dio*. At the end of her rosary, she called for me with outstretched arms. She reached into the pocket of her apron, the home for her assorted coins, a large, white handkerchief, and an assortment of penny candy. That day, she gifted me with a prayer card, an image of a young woman dressed in long, flowing robes with a blade of gold wheat in her left hand. In the palm of her right hand was a rounded plate with two eyes lifted toward the heavens. I was afraid to look at the eyes when my grandmother told me the story of Lucia, a beautiful and noble Sicilian woman pursued by a rich and powerful prince. He admired her beauty and fell in love with her eyes. Lucia was devoted only to God.

"*Hai la luce nelle occhi.*" my grandmother said. I don't want to have the Saint's special light in my eyes. She looked at me with such worry, "*Stai attendo, figlia mio.*" Be careful, my daughter.

Lucia plucked her dark, green eyes from its sockets and placed them on a pewter plate as a gift to the man whom she refused to marry. I was a child and did not understand why one would choose darkness over light. Years later, I would make choices that descended me into darkness, but I did not know this then. I only knew that this story frightened me.

***

I remember when I chose darkness over light, and when the light of the saints failed me. I lived on Saint Margaret Street, a third-floor walk-up in a brick tenement that rose slightly above the others on a narrow street in Boston's North End. There was one entrance to the apartment, a flimsy white door and a dubious exit from the kitchen window that led to an eroded and rusted, narrow fire escape. The stairs of the fire escape didn't reach the pavement but hung precariously off to the side dangling in mid-air between the second and third floor of my tenement. The stairs led nowhere. I worried about escaping from a fire or exiting if another danger entered my space. The landlord sensed my fears or maybe thought that a young woman in her early twenties needed protection. He advised me to keep an extra house key at Bovi's, a bakery shop on the corner of our street. The men baked bread, twenty-four hours a day, and could

help me in an emergency or help me if I lost my key. I felt comfort knowing that someone would watch over me, and leave my key to the bakers of bread.

There was a culture of protection in the North End. Residents felt a duty to watch over their own and keep outsiders from entering their community. I was an insider, the social worker, the Italian girl who spoke their language and calmed their fears. I spent my days as the trusted advocate who helped elderly residents remain in their homes. My days were consumed coordinating health care services, translating government documents, and assuaging fears. I created safety for others, but neglected to create it for myself.

Danger comes back to haunt me in the images of Saint Margaret Street, the one without the saints watching over me. One dark night I awoke to the chaos of melded sobs and screams. The bakers had given my key to a man who once belonged to me, the one who wouldn't let me go. The bakers didn't recognize the golden glint in his green eyes that marked the transition from charisma to danger. He entered my space, but I did not hear him.

I barely recall his figure, half-man, half-boy, slumped in the corner of my bedroom. His hands clutched savagely at his hair, his once deep voice shrilled in a high-pitch terror, "you look like a bird with a broken wing." Blackness closed in on me.

I opened my eyes to glaring fluorescent lights in a frigid room with a young doctor bent over me.

"You have a serious fracture in the humerus bone," he said. You're lucky to not need a body cast."

I didn't feel lucky. I pleaded with this stranger not to let me go.

"This isn't a hotel," he said and signed my discharge orders.

I returned to my grandmother's kitchen and carefully crossed the threshold into the safety of her space. She was slouched in a wooden chair and dressed in the black of a mourning widow. Her hands grasped silver rosary beads as she whispered prayers for strength. I hoped St. Joseph would give her the courage to bear the burial of my grandfather. I prayed for strength as well. She gasped at my sight, and covered her mouth with one hand that muted a scream or a prayer from her lips. Her eyes widened with fear: Sadness filled the space between us.

"*Ha preso la luce dei tuoi occhi*." She told me that he has taken the light from my eyes.

I returned to the burial place of my memory to resurrect the night where I lost the light in my eyes. The green, rectangular sign on the corner was lettered in white, 'Margaret Street,' without the saint before her name, the one who believed suffering was the path to God's love. The fire escape still hung in mid-air and the bakers made bread. I remembered the night when no saints protected me, the night I failed to protect myself. Margaret Street was not a blessed place, and suffering will not bring you closer to God.

More than forty years pass and I return to the saint who protects the light in our eyes. It's December, and I sit with my mother at the brown Formica table. Her eyes are vacant and staring at darkness.

"*Domani e la festa di Santa Lucia.*" She doesn't look up when she reminds me that tomorrow is the feast day of Saint Lucy. My mother is ninety years old, and macular degeneration has left her in a world of darkness.

"*Dobbiamo fare la cuccia.*" She says, determined to honor this patron saint.

The feast day of Santa Lucia endures in my family. On December 13, and on this day only, we abstain from bread and eat *cuccia*—a pudding made from cornstarch and milk, blended with the softened kernels of wheat berries, and sprinkled with chocolate shavings and the coarse threads of freshly ground cinnamon. The *cuccia* is to remind us of the famine in 1582 that swept Sicily like a plague. The hungry masses prayed fervently to Santa Lucia and their prayers answered when a ship—guided by the light of her eyes—laden with wheat sailed into the harbor. In their desperate state of hunger, the villagers quickly boiled and ate the wheat berries as they were too weak to make bread.

I want to tell my mother that Santa Lucia has failed both of us. Instead, I retrieve the small green metal file box and search through the index cards for her recipe. The disorganized box contains recipe cards from grocery stores with pictures of meals that we never made, index cards with neatly typed recipes from my high-school cooking class, and loose pages of yellow paper with my mother's precise script handwriting. I unfold a thin piece of stationary with penciled words, faded with age, her recipe for the saint's pudding. The instructions are vague and I don't know

the English word for *cuccia*. We enter the familiar and tense discourse we know as conversation.

"Go buy the *cuccia*," She demands.

"Is it wheat berry in English?" I ask.

"No, it's *cuccia*," she insists, "and don't go buying wheat berries."

"Do you think it's wheat germ?" I ask with no patience.

"Maria, it's *cuccia!*" she yells.

"So where do I find it?" I yell louder.

"Go to the Black Crow."

My mother has not entered a grocery store in years. I don't know how she knew about this natural food store, but I am too tired to fight. The road to the Black Crow passes the cemetery that holds my grandmother and her gravestone that I can no longer find. I want to tell her that the light has returned to my eyes.

The Black Crow has two rows of clear plastic bins with index cards typed in boldface letters noting the various types of rice, flour, and grain. There are several types of wheat berries and one of the bins is labeled '*cuccia*' in penciled lettering.

I return with the *cuccia* and gather the other ingredients for the pudding that will honor the saint. I don't ask my mother why she holds a devotion to the saint who failed her. Her faith has been and still is greater than mine. She believes that the teaching of Santa Lucia was about our own blindness, and of the light that we give away.

Toward the Amber Light

Dogtown to the right the ocean
to the left
opens out the light the river flowing
at my feet
Gloucester to my back
the light hangs
from the wheel of heaven
the great Ocean
on balance
the air is as wide as the light

Charles Olson

I arrived in Paris as the city still slept. A gentle mist brought comfort as I navigated foreign streets holding a scrap of paper with the name of an *auberge.* I had no map, but simply the directions from a kind stranger helping a lost visitor find her way. The silence of the city was broken by delivery trucks staggering on stone pavers, and the clash of rolling, metal shutters opening early morning bakery shops.

The inn, a narrow, gray stone building, had a wrought iron lantern with a yellow flickering bulb that illuminated its wooden sign. I negotiated my check-in by pointing to phrases in my dictionary. The innkeeper escorted me as we walked up three flights of stairs to a small room with a metal-framed bed in the alcove. I was too tired to change my clothes and curled into the cotton quilt and fell into a deep sleep.

I was jolted awake by a loud knock on my door.

"Bonjour mademoiselle, j'ai le petit dejeuner."

I recognized the word 'bonjour' and opened the door to a tray of café au lait and a warm, buttery croissant.

"Merci," I managed to say.

The morning light filtered through the shutters. I unclasped the shutter's metal hinge that opened to a view of the Seine. Paris was lit by a bright sun in a cloudless sky, but the city felt sad and somber. Gray buildings with metal rooftops cast shadows of different shapes on the river. In the small bathroom down the hall, I looked into a small, rounded mirror. I wondered if I had changed, but I still wore sadness on my face. I was haunted by the man who rejected me. I carried this sadness through the streets, walking miles, to release my loneliness. I had no plans for this gray city, found a payphone, and made a collect call.

"Mom, I just want you to know that I am safe."

"*Vai Bene,* that's good," She said relieved and then asked about the weather.

"Sunny right now," I lied.

"What's the food like?"

"Great," I lied again. "The restaurants are great and not too expensive."

I did not venture into restaurants, as my sadness marked me as alone. I ate my bread and cheese on benches by the Seine. Old men in dark clothes sat silent and alone. They wore the faces of sadness and loneliness.

Something inside me eventually shifted. I could redefine myself in this city of stone. I began to disconnect with my past, and the young woman lost in loneliness. A surge of energy guided me to search for the light shrouded in this grayness. I devoured museums during the day, explored the neighborhoods of Paris, and dined in outdoor cafes. Men followed me, I ignored them.

Three young French women invited me to their table, I joined them. They spoke no English and I spoke no French: my small phrase book became our

connection. We became inseparable as friends and explored France with an innocence that touched my heart and lifted the shroud of grayness over me. We parted tearfully when it was time for me to leave France. They had pleaded for me to travel with them back to their homes in Lyon. I did not belong in France, and she did not belong to me.

At a later time in my life, I will question if this journey was searching for biological roots, a connection to my French birth woman. I will arrive at the same answer, France would remain a stranger to me. I departed on a train, unsure of my destination, with a train pass that could take me anywhere.

A chaotic crowd of tourists and travelers descended on Florence's Stazione di Santa Maria Novella as I searched for the exit that would take us to the square. Two guys had joined me on the train and now relied on my Italian to help them with directions to the Piazza del Duomo. They carried guide books for Europe on the cheap, lugged heavy backpacks, and wore rugged hiking books. They looked hot and clumsy, but there was an ease about them that I envied. At the Piazza, we cooled our faces in the fountains, took photographs of the Duomo, and even more photos of each other. Toward evening, they invited me to join them at a hostel.

"I want to be alone," I said.

I didn't want to be alone, but needed to learn that I could survive in my aloneness. My new friends wished me luck as I walked toward the Ponte Vecchio in search of a room. A small, brass plate on a stone wall read "*Pensione Quisiana.*" The building was dark stone and its two massive doors, painted in the color of the Arno River. I banged on the brass door knocker and one door opened to a sliver.

"*Buona sera signorina*," an older man said as he bowed to me. "*Mi scusi, la nostra pensione e' molto vecchhio.*"

He apologized that his *pensione* was too old as he waved me into a grand foyer. A gilded mirror dominated the room and I caught my image. I was dressed in worn-out blue jeans and a blouse in the colors of a spring garden with eyes that sparkled the brightest of blue. The light had returned to my eyes. He led me to third floor, and to small room with a balcony that opened to the majestic view of the Arno and Ponte Vecchio. I fell in love with Florence. I was beginning to like myself.

Years later, I will see the movie "Room with a View" and recognize the *pensione* that touched my heart. Many years later, I will celebrate my 30th anniversary and revisit the *pensione,* and the stunning beauty of Florence. The *pensione* would lose its grandeur to a graceless and thoughtless modernization; but the large, gold-framed mirror was still in the hall. My husband would photograph me looking into the mirror replicating the photograph I took of myself so many years ago. We will book a charming studio across the Arno with a view of what was once the *Pensione Quisiana.* I will remember my younger self, lost and alone, who hoped she had the strength to survive. I will return to the Cathedral and in the quiet that follows mass, I will light two candles in red votive glasses—blessings of peace for my father's and grandmother's souls. A third candle will be lit in gratitude for the blessings of three sons, and for the husband who touches my soul.

I traveled through Italy and walked the cobbled streets of ancient cities shedding my loneliness on the stones. I gathered strength from Roman ruins, found peace in the churches, and connected with the richness of this earth. When I felt strong and whole, an internal compass directed me south to the place that I would call home.

"*Zia Caterina, sono alla stazione ferroviaria di Napoli*," I said.

I had called my aunt from the train station in Napoli telling her that I was on my way.

"*Figlia mia, quando torni a case al parta sara aperta*," my aunt said.

She called me, her daughter, and said that the door would be open when I arrive.

I purchased bottled water and two *arancini,* fried crispy rice balls filled with meat sauce and mozzarella for the nine-hour train ride to Palermo. The train station was dark with throngs of travelers rushing for trains and gesturing wildly with their hands. As I traveled south, the people became more dramatic with their gestures, and more demonstrative with their emotions. None of this compares to Sicilians who have the greatest passion for life and display their emotions with vivid dramatic scenes in a language invented for love and anger.

I rode in a third-class compartment, crushed between members of a large Sicilian family, who brought enough food to feed every passenger on the train. My hopes for a quiet ride shattered by a barrage of questions about life in America, and even more questions about why I was traveling alone.

"*Mai non sei sposato*?" the oldest woman asked.

"*No, forse non e arrivato quello guisto*," I said lying that I wasn't married because the right man had not arrived in my life.

"*Una vita senza figli e vuota*," she said making clucking sounds with her tongue. I didn't answer her as I already knew that a life without children would be empty. Our conversation ended with the breaking of bread and the passing of paper plates filled with olives, cheese, and salami. People talked at the same time, interrupted each other without apology, and ate as if this meal would be their last.

When the train boarded the ferry to Messina, I went to the upper deck and drank in the salt air as we moved toward the amber light that radiated from the distant island.

I was returning after two years, but it felt like decades had passed since we, my mom, brother, and I, had traveled here. I had been confident and strong, an accomplished student, activist for women's rights, and passionately in love with a man who would abandon me. Our travels took us hiking on the hills of her hometown to watch the shepherds make cheese, to Aida—an opera set in the baths of Caracalla, and to the cathedrals of Venice, Milan, Rome, and Florence. Together, we visited museums, dined in outdoor restaurants, and took boat rides on the Venetian canals. We ventured to Switzerland and stayed in Lugano, a town surrounded by mountains and the glacier lake that sparkled a silver blue.

"Maria, I feel different here," my mom had said, "I can breathe."

My mother will recall these memories to me when she becomes old and frail. I will remember how she smiled and looked free. She will remember the hills surrounding the sparkling lake, she will talk about the opera, and laugh at the number of museums that I made her see. I had wanted her to see the beauty of the country that she no longer called home: I wanted her to see something beautiful in me.

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The dry, midday heat in Sicily washed over me as I stood on the platform of the train station.

"*Sono qui, sono qui*!" My uncle Vincenzo stood next to his rusty Fiat 500 waving frantically and yelling, "I am here, I am here."

I repeated those words to myself and knew that I had arrived home.

My uncle drove the narrow streets to Terrasini at a racing pace, honked at every corner, and cursed to no one in particular. It was mid-day, the time of siesta, and the homes were shuttered from light and heat. He parked at Via Gorizia and a long honk announced my arrival and also roused several neighbors from their sleep. At the door, my aunt appeared from the tangle of multi-colored plastic strands that served as a shield against insects and an entrance for gentle breezes. These screens stood at the threshold of public and private space inviting guests and repelling enemies.

"*Finalmente sei qui,* " my aunt said as she embraced me with strong arms telling me that finally I had arrived.

"*E' sempre il zano*," she said, teasing me that I always carried a backpack.

I slept in the alcove—a windowless, narrow room off the dining area—with an arched ceiling, and a lace curtain for a door. The room, once used for food storage, had a twin bed with a metal frame, a ladderback chair, and an old wooden bureau. For days, my aunt insisted that I sleep in her bedroom, and that my uncle would sleep with his chickens at the neighboring farmhouse. I refused to take her room and found comfort within the walls of the alcove.

The house had one master bedroom that opened to two windowless rooms that once served as bedrooms for three generations of family, and more recently bedrooms for my four cousins. Our family is a complicated web of relationships formed by blood and too many marriages among first cousins. This home embraced my father, his two brothers, and their mother during the World War II.

I once asked my mother where everyone slept.

"At night, we rolled mattresses on the floor," Mom said. "Your Aunt Caterina was afraid of mice so she slept on top of the dining table."

"Not much privacy," I retorted with a bit of sarcasm in my voice.

"We were too poor to worry about privacy." She said.

I didn't seem to care about private space either. I was shedding boundaries that no longer served me.

Throughout the day, family and neighbors crossed the threshold of our house announcing their arrival with the word, *permisso*, as they spread open the curtain of stranded beads. The word *permisso* means permission and Sicilians permit everyone to enter their homes. I greeted neighbors curious to meet the American niece who traveled alone, and kissed relatives wanting news of our family in the states. My cousins, now married with homes of their own, stopped in for espresso, dropped off children and groceries, and returned for *pranzo*, our mid-day meal.

My aunt started her day like a captain preparing for war. In the early morning hours, she filled several jugs of water, jugs too heavy for me to lift, with enough water to wash clothes and to cook. She hated this chore and cursed nameless

government officials who turned off the water supply by noon. Throughout the day, vendors paraded our streets and bellowed the praises of their wares.

"*Pomodoro fresco*!" The earliest morning vendor sung as the women flocked to his cart for the fresh tomatoes that would make today's sauce. The women in our neighborhood knew each vendor by name; but they never let down their guard. Purchasing fruit and vegetables required the finesse of haggling; an art mastered by the oldest women who dressed in the requisite black of mourning for long, lost husbands.

"*Non spremere le mie pesche*," a vendor screamed as he pushed the hands of an old women away from his peaches. She cursed him and went on to inspect the figs. I watched this drama unfold several times a day as women called men thieves, and haggled the prices down to the lowest lira. The dance of barter always ended with a final round of curses as the women marched back to their homes carrying indignation and the pride of victory.

I often wondered if the women misdirected years of anger and frustration on these vendors. Unresolved emotions for the men who had done them wrong. Men who had left them in the black dress of mourning. I felt conflicted about my sympathies and felt badly for the vendors and for the stronghold of older women dressed in black.

Each morning, I awoke to the smell of espresso and the sounds of my aunt's laments. My routine merged with hers as we divided household chores—mine were the easiest—and we talked about everything that was in my heart. My day started in her kitchen. It was a small, rectangular room; a refrigerator, white sink, and a four-

burner stove—a gift from my mother—lined one wall. Under a small side window was a utility sink, a basin always in use, and on the other end of the kitchen was our bathroom. The ceramic floor tiles, hand-painted by local artisans several centuries ago, displayed a floral motif in the colors of the sun and sea. My aunt threatened to replace her tiled floors, its colors faded by the footsteps of the women before me, the women that I seek to belong to. Several years later, I will return to Terrasini and buy an old ceramic tile, a bursting yellow flower surrounded by a swirl of terracotta and cobalt blue. My aunt will chastise me for paying 45,000 *lire* for this tile.

"*Potuto prendere uno dei miei*," my Aunt said that I could have taken one of her tiles. She will shake her head in disbelief that she has a niece who would spend so much money on something so old and worn. This tile--*un recordo*—a reminder of the past, and my connection to the place of light, has a prominent place in the center of my kitchen.

But back then in her kitchen, I sipped coffee and ate biscotti, baked to the color of brown cinnamon. My aunt reported the latest gossip in town starting with the same two words, "*Lo sai*." But I never knew who or what she was referring to, but that didn't matter to my aunt. Her stories told the sagas of new births, marriages, sicknesses, and deaths and always ended with her prayers for someone's fortune or loss.

On one of these mornings, she complained about the *scirocco*, the hot air that descends on Sicily from North Africa. At the stove, she crushed fresh tomatoes with her hands squeezing its sweet juices into our sauce pan. In next burner, she alternated frying small rounds of eggplant dipped in batter and coated with fresh bread crumbs.

She dreaded the heat that I so craved, and I knew that she was determined to complete her cooking by mid-morning, before the arrival of noon's scorching heat.

Zia, resposa," I said. My aunt turned toward me, wiped her forehead with the apron's hem, sat down and rested, heeding my advice.

"*Lavori troppo*," I gently chastised her for working too hard.

"*Figlia mia,"* my aunt said with a long sigh. "*Non so perche' il cuore di mamma sia cosi duro."* My aunt called me her daughter and said that she doesn't understand why my mother's heart was so hard. Neither did I.

"*Il mio cuore e' diverso*," she said telling me that her heart is different. Her heart bursts with love.

"*Figlia mia, credo*…" she said, with tears streaming into the dampness of her face. She told me that my mother's heart is stone because she did not get enough of a mother's love. God took our mother away too early.

My grandmother died at thirty-eight descending into the ravages of depression from the abandonment that left five shattered children in her wake. I was part of this wake and ploughing through the trail of sadness.

"*Non e colpa sua, non e colpa sua*," she repeated the words like a prayer. "It's not her fault, it's not her fault."

I knew that she was telling me to be more forgiving, to understand the mother who could not express love—neither by words nor with acts—a heart sealed in the black of her communion dress. If it was not her fault, then I had no one to blame. I wasn't ready to understand my mother, I was simply trying to understand myself.

After *pranzo*, I cleared the table. Zia swept the crumbs from our meal out toward the street, away from the large sidewalks that served as sitting rooms for the women of the Terrasini. On late afternoons, after the time of siesta when the air has cooled, women opened their louvered shuttered doors and crossed the threshold from private to public space. It was not unusual to see a gathering of four to five women knitting and crocheting for their daughter's trousseau or a newly born grandchild. "*Mai che' fare*," the common refrain. "What can we do?" They said in resignation knowing how much was beyond their control. They comforted wounds with broken sentences while heads nodded, and hands worked in this shared communion. This was the sacred time of women.

Later than afternoon, my aunt paused at the threshold and waved a greeting, "*Ciao entrare"*

Adriana kissed my aunt on both cheeks and crossed the threshold into our dining room.

"*Ciao, bella*," I said delighted to see my dearest friend.

"*Sei pronta*," Adrianna asked as she kissed both of my cheeks.

I will never be as ready as Adrianna. We had met at the *spiaggia*, she was thirteen and I was one year older. It was August, and Terrasini was silenced by the scorching heat. The skies mirrored the color of the sea; the sand scorched the bottom of our bare feet. I stood on the edge of a thin towel talking in English with cousins from the states. At the sound of our words, a young woman bolted to my side.

"I study English," she said in a heavy Italian accent. "Where you from?"

"Gloucester in the United States," I said.

"Ah, I have relatives in Gloucester," she said reaching for my hand. We launched our friendship that day.

Adriana was a classic beauty whose figure turned every man's head. Her green eyes were shaped like almonds and a mass of brown curls framed her heart-shaped face. We swam backstrokes and talked about our dreams while the sunburnt, amber hills looked down on us. We became inseparable that first summer, the start of a friendship that became a continuous source of strength and love throughout my life.

"*Un momento,*" I said and hurried off to get my bag. We were headed to Palermo, her family home in the city, for a few days of shopping, dancing, and simply being free. We drove the autostrada, the highway that follows the Tyrrhenian coast and across the Madonie mountains. The views were spectacular, but it was a treacherous route. Sicilians are known for ignoring speed limits and crossing traffic lines without the use of flashing blinkers. In the car, Adrianna listed the activities that she had planned for us that included dinner with two new American friends. Men competed among themselves to be near Adrianna. She had a power over men that was not based on flirty or seductive behavior. Adrianna was beautiful, charming, and in command of herself. She held the highest self-regard, and would not tolerate any unwelcome advances or comments. I was struck by our differences; the pride she felt about herself, and the self-doubt that overwhelmed me. We established boundary lines with men. Our bodies were ours and would not be shared with men. We kept those boundaries intact. I still craved the body of the man who left me and had no trust in Italian men.

At the house, her mother fussed over both of us as we dressed for dinner. She brought out jewelry for us to borrow, lipsticks to sample, and two glasses filled with Limoncello—the island favored lemon liquor—as an *appertivo*. When we left, she kissed Adrianna on both checks and said, "*Sei Bellissima, divertiti.*"

My mother never said, 'you are beautiful" or 'have fun'. She believed that having fun was a sin, and being beautiful was a curse. Fun and beauty are temptations for men. Adrianna's mother glowed in her daughter's beauty. But there seemed to be something more in how she said, "*divertiti.*" Her voice sounded a deep longing for something that was lost, and a hope that her daughter could make her whole again. Perhaps, in different ways, my mother was seeking the same.

My life settled into the domesticity of Sicilian life. Household chores in the early morning and caring for Gianni, my cousin Valentina's two-year son. Valentina worked as a bookkeeper for the municipality, a job she both hated and needed. There were no daycare centers in Terrasini: families took care of their own. I pushed Gianni's stroller on dusty streets to the *Piazza Duomo*, the town's center, where the *Madonna* of the *Chiesa Madre* looked down on us. This cobblestoned square was flanked by coffee shops, clothing stores, and the *tabacinno*, the tobacco store that also sold stamps, stationery, candy, and toys. This was Gianni's favorite stop and mine was Friend's Bar where I sipped on cappuccino and shared my *cornetto*, a warm brioche filled with yellow cream, with Gianni. In caring for Gianni, I realized that I both wanted and needed to have child of my own.

At noon, we always returned to the home for our mid-day meal. A cloth tablecloth covered our dining room table set a *Lacrime di Cristo*, Tears of Christ, a

strong local wine, olive oil and red wine vinegar, and several loaves of warm bread. Plates and silverware were piled in the corner. Zio sat at the head of table impatiently waiting for his children to arrive. My cousins, married and living in neighboring homes, migrated to *Via Gorizia* for the main meal of the day. One by one, my cousins crossed the threshold into the dining room, kissed their father, and lamented about the problems of the day. We ate our meals with constant motion, swirling long strands of pasta, cutting chunks of cheese, and passing the wine among each other. There was no stillness at our table. We raised our voices above each other's as we argued rights and wrongs. Fists pounded on the table for emphasis when words were not enough to make our case. Laughter and anger blended like a spicy sauce. This was my family, the one I didn't want to leave.

After the meal, we all kissed each other, my cousins left for their homes, and *Via Gorizia* was shuttered against the afternoon heat. Zio took his siesta at the farm house, while Zia rested in cool, dark spaces in our house: I sought refuge in the light. I headed toward the sea and claimed the beach for my own. I swam in the turquoise waters, a sea that was cupped into the arms of the amber hills that hugged our coastline. I felt renewed by these waters and comforted by the hills.

My evenings filled with friendships, laughter and dance. One of the villagers had fallen in love with me. I kept my boundaries knowing the fickleness of Sicilian men, but I dreamed of a wedding, a child of my own, and a life in the place where I felt whole. I had fallen in love with this dream.

My days turned to weeks, to months, and to changing seasons. Winter was drawing close, the skies became darker, and I was called back to Gloucester. My fate

had changed on an unremarkable day where Zia pressed clothes with a black cast iron and I swept floors talking about everything that was in my head. The phone rang, "*Pronto*," my aunt said. "*Come stai.*" A long pause followed the words 'how are you.' The phone was passed to me and my mother's voice said, "I am sick with chest pains, and you are still there."

I had spent six months living in Terrasini, in the spaces that she once called *una casa sensa amore,* but I found love in her old home. I was embraced by love and entangled in the lives of my aunt and uncle, and a houseful of cousins and friends. I left with regret, and left the strongest part of me behind.

My family and friends accompanied me to Punta Raisi, an airport surrounded by the Gulf of Castellemare, nestled in the shadows of the cooper-colored mountains. I was dressed for Sicily's winter: a pleated skirt with a matching jacket made in soft merino wool, leather boots that matched the color of our mountains, and a saddle bag that held my documents. Our unusual silence was broken by my uncle.

"*Ho paura che questa sia l'ultima volta che ci vidiamo*." He sobbed and was afraid that we would not each other again.

I ran to him and hugged the rugged man with a worn face and gravelly voice, kissed the damp cheeks of my relatives and friends, and entered the terminal. From the plane's window seat, I watched them as they waved white handkerchiefs toward the sky, but it was I who had surrendered.

I returned to Gloucester filled with the glow of amber hills to a mother who had feigned illness and demanded my return. She greeted me with anger and our

relationship became more strained as she screamed my list failures: "Just should settle down and be married. You are never satisfied and want too much." With my failures, I left her and Gloucester once again.

I found a new job, moved into a brownstone in Back Bay, and rebuilt my life. Andriana joined me in Boston and we spent the next three months exploring the city and waiting for the Sicilian man who said he had fallen in love. A letter arrived, but he did not. He wrote that it was for the best as his mother would not accept an American girl to be his wife. The last time, it was a Jewish mother who told her son that she would not accept a Sicilian girl to be his wife. I never loved the Sicilian man: I just needed someone to give me the dream of child and home, but it was all shattering inside me.

It was in these shadows of failure and shattered dreams that I met him. He was tall and handsome in a Jimmy Dean sort of way with straight-legged blue jeans and one sleeve of his t-shirt rolled up to hold a packet of Marlborough cigarettes. He had curly, brown hair with dark green eyes that looked right through me. He called himself, *black Irish,* although he was raised by an Italian mother and an army of Italian aunts. My mother loved him.

I married him in blindness, hoping that he would make me whole. I lived with him without light, and left him over and over again. He was relentless with his power and found me in hiding places; oblivious to restraining orders and threats of police. I was on guard watching for the golden glint that flashed in his eyes. My walls and doors were punctuated by the marks of his fists. I dreaded when he ran out of walls.

Sometimes he would leave after these rages, other times, he would stay. I no longer remember which one was easier.

In the dark silence of domestic violence, I had managed to hold a director's job in advocating for the rights of those living at the margins of our world. Once again, in the safety I had created for others, I had failed to create this for myself. I returned to the classroom and studied evenings for a Master's degree. I was preparing myself for the day that he would let me free. No one could save me: he would be the one to decide when and how to let me go.

Seven years passed, and I awakened to a dream of two small birds, one was white and the other black. They were perched high in a gilded cage and sang a love song to each other. Something heavy dropped inside me and I shuddered in the liminal space of sleep and wake. The black bird fell from its perch and I felt death in my heart. This was the morning of our divorce, and I was now free to find the light.

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Per favore, potre avere un cappuccino e due cornetti? I asked in a loud voice trying to get the attention of a young barista taking multiple orders from early morning passengers. It was May 7, 2019, my sixty-fifth birthday, and I had ordered cappuccino for me, and two warm *cornetti* filled with sweet pastry cream for my grandsons Keller Kai and Riley Bay. My son Saer and his wife Genell were at a separate counter trying to negotiate an order for espresso. I signaled to them and pointed to the register where they need to pay for their items first. I waved my receipt in the air hoping they would understand the complicated system for ordering drinks at a counter.

Italians are decisive about their food and drinks. Saer shrugged and smiled in what will be the first of many new adjustments to the nuances of Italian culture. We were at the Leonardo Di Vinci airport waiting for the Alitalia flight to take us to the island of light.

The flight from Rome to Punta Raisa airport was only an hour but felt like an eternity. Bill, my husband, talked excitedly about Sicily and how my cousins will be at the airport to greet us. He told my children that my cousins talk loudly with demonstrative hand gestures; but to not be alarmed as their conversations were mostly about food. He was excited. I was anxious about our decision and filled with self-doubts. We had arranged for our three sons, their wives and girlfriends, to celebrate my birthday and our thirtieth anniversary in Terrasini Sicily. Over the next twenty-four hours, they would arrive from their homes in California and Nova Scotia to meet my family, and the place that I call home.

I had created a vision that my family will discover the magic of Sicily and embrace all that I love about the land and the people. Justin and Saer my two oldest sons, step-sons only in a technical sense, had never been to Sicily. I have filled them with Sicilian stories and recipes from this land for more than thirty years. Now, I was afraid that they might dismiss Sicily, and maybe dismiss me.

We exited the chaos of the Punti Raisi airport and formed a waiting line at the main entrance of the terminal. We were jet-lagged and weary; I was anxious about our rides, and how we will negotiate finding the villa that I rented on Airbnb. Thirty minutes passed, cars and taxi's pick-upped passengers, and we continued our wait. I

paced and tried to call, but my cell phone did not connect. We negotiated a rental car, secured vague directions, and drove through the hills and toward the sea in an awkward silence. I was disappointed that my cousins were not there to greet us; and my children knew this as well.

We entered the villa in the stillness of the afternoon siesta. High walls of natural stone enclosed a large red-tiled patio with tables and chairs, an outdoor kitchen with a wood-fired pizza oven, and a large built-in swimming pool. The gardens were lush and the sweet scent of jasmine filled this outdoor space. Our silence was broken by the sound of loud voices at the iron gate. Three cars were parked on the side of our road. I heard a clash of voices as they piled out of their cars. My cousins had found us.

"*Dove eri*!" my cousin Gianna yelled as tears filled her eyes. "*Eravamo cosi preoccupati.*"

She asked where we had been and I asked the same. In their great state of worry, my cousins had called the police and filed a report for missing people. In between the words of worry, we were simultaneously chastised and hugged. Three cars with six cousins had arrived at the small Punti Raisa airport to pick us up, but I never learned where they had waited. I laughed and hugged them all again.

"*Andiamo*," Gianna said. "*La pasta ora e fredda.*"

She told us let's go with a sigh of frustration that the pasta was now cold. Some of us piled into the cars, others walked up the hill. Unknowingly, we booked a Villa on the same street, a short walk, to the homes of both my cousin Gianna and Vito.

The table was set for fifteen people. We feasted on the antipasti beginning with caponata—a sweet and sour Sicilian appetizer made with sautéed eggplants, caramelized onions, green olives, celery, tomatoes, and pine nuts—sundried tomatoes roasted and stuffed with a breadcrumb dressing, several varieties of local cheeses, and warm loaves of bread. I was squeezed between two of my cousins and alternated between Sicilian and English. My Sicilian family was curious about Saer and Genell and have already fallen in love with Riley and Keller. Gianna had her arm around Genell's shoulder as she with talked in rapid-fire Italian. Genell was smiling and nodding yes. I interrupted with a translation.

"*Non chi bisogno*," Gianna said. She said it wasn't necessary to translate as they understood each other just fine. She was right. Genell glowed in the warmth of this room. The word "mangia" punctuated the air as entrees were brought to our table. Gianna served a pasta with a rich, thick tomato sauce followed with grilled fish and thin slices of lemons. We ended our meal with a crostata, a rustic torte filled with an apricot jam. I was back at the table speaking the language of my youth, absorbing the richness of this land through the flavors and smells at this table. The food told a history of the people that cultivated its soil and fished from its sea. Sicilians respect this history and recreate the meals of the generations that came before them. In its simplicity, Sicilian food illuminates the seasons of nature and of life. I want to eat this way for the rest of my life. I want to linger at this table, preserving the earthy scent of our foods and the voices that speak of family.

The next day Collin and Katherine arrived from California, an event that launched another celebratory dinner. When Collin entered the kitchen, my cousins

literally jumped from the table and screamed his name as they embraced the young man that they haven't seen in ten years. I watched them hug my son, kiss him on both checks, and then kiss him again.

My son glowed in the arms of this family. These teased him through dinner, a menu graciously modified to accommodate the vegan lifestyle of Collin and Katherine. As she served eggplant parmesan without the cheese, she shared her dismay that the milk of a good cow won't hurt you. Then she launched into a tirade about the virtues of an egg. She lamented in Sicilian sparing my children from her refrain.

"*Ma quando ti sposi*?" asked Vito. He had his right arm waving in the air waiting to hear when Collin would get married. Katherine's eye light up as she too was waiting for his reply.

"Lei e pronta!" said Vito, now pointing to Katherine that 'she looks ready.' My cousin Lorenzo, a deacon in the church, offered to marry them. Gianna and Gaetano promised to come to the wedding, which would make it their first trip across the Atlantic Ocean. Collin laughed and blushed just the slightest of red, "Well, there goes my plans for a simple wedding."

I could never have had this conversation with my son. The trust, love, and laughter in this room made so much more possible. Like the thresholds we cross from public to private spaces, there are no boundaries among family in the Sicilian home. I felt like two wooden shutters had opened and a new light was cast on me. I watched as my American and Sicilian family merged seamlessly into one. Life and love burst open in our spaces together.

My husband wanted to take hikes in the barren hills of the Madonie Mountains. I was reluctant to exit my new routine, a life reunited with family and my dearest friend Adrianna, but I agreed knowing his need to escape into the solitude of nature. With no map and with no visible trails, we hiked the narrow footpaths trails reserved for sheep herders and the coarse gravel paths used by local farmers. As we hiked, I noticed flashes of color embedded in the dust and stones of the gravel paths. We had discovered a path filled with fragments of ceramic tiles, hand-painted by local artisans' centuries before us. Traces of intricate patterns, painted in the colors of this island, told a story of the families who lived before us on this land. I remembered my aunt and the floors of Via Goriza and a greater loss filled me. I collected the fragments of this story and brought them to my home. A centerpiece filled with the light of a white candle illuminate the colors of the tiles and remind me of the untold stories of the stones.

My family wanted to see the home of my mother, the home of my aunt and the cousins that surround us. We walked to Via Goriza in the quiet of the mid-afternoon. The homes were shuttered, protected from the mid-day sun. I pointed to a one-story stucco building, the paint faded and chipped, the windows shuttered. The colored plastic strands were motionless at the threshold. I thought of my aunt and longed for her to appear in the strands, to emerge and re-enter into our lives. There was no motion: She was gone. I whispered, thank you.

We planned a party in our Villa setting an elegant table for twenty-eight, enough chairs to seat my cousins, their children, and grandchildren. We cooked and

decorated for the party we named, "*Auguri per la Famigli*." This was a night to share gratitude and good wishes for our family.

"Mom, come up here!" Collin yelled from the roof terrace.

"Col, I'm busy right now with cooking."

"You have to come up!" Bill said.

I joined them on the open terrace. The sun loomed on the water's horizon reflecting an orange light on the gentle waves of our turquoise sea. All ten of us faced the setting sun surrounded by the barren hills glowing in the colors of the sun. We held our breaths as the shutter clicked and captured the amber light radiating on our faces, and in our hearts. I am filled with boundless love and gratitude for the amber hills and the glowing family that surrounds me. I am home.

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